THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.

MAGAZINE

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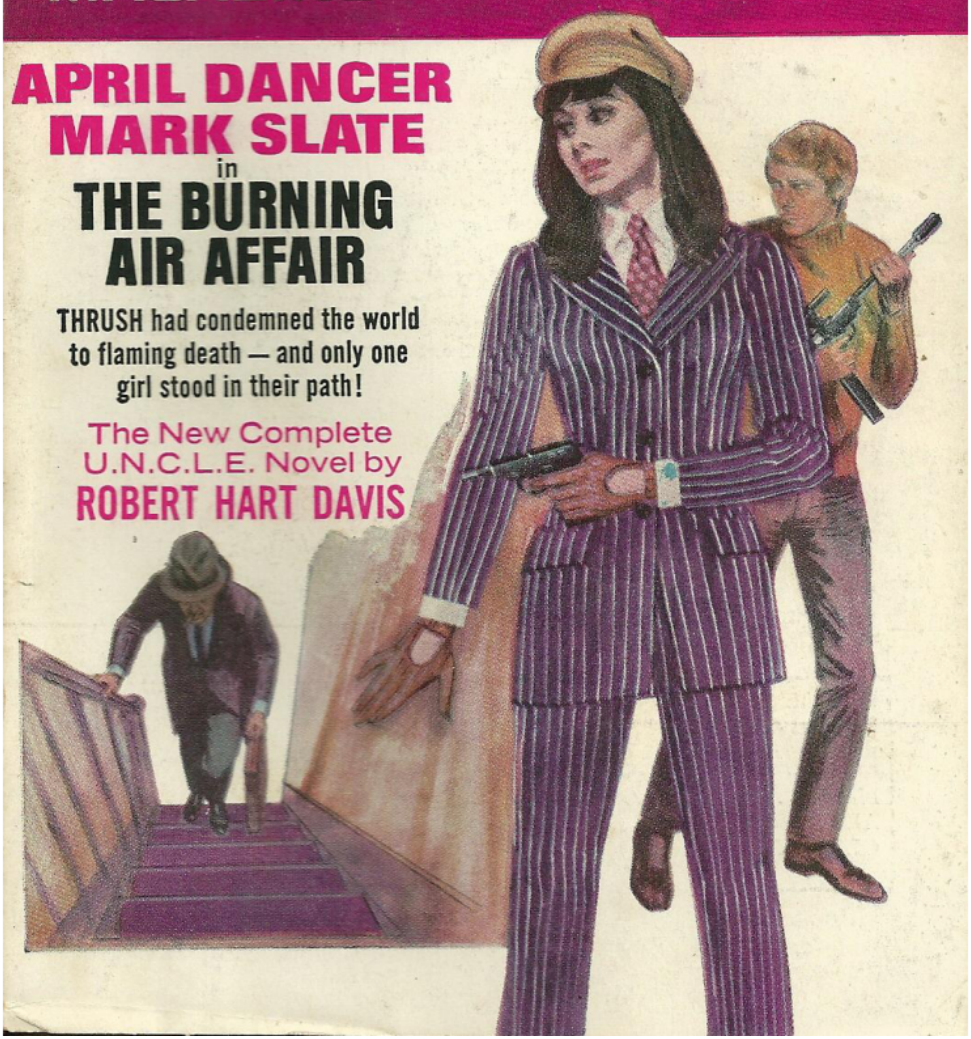
APRIL DANCER
MARK SLATE
in
THE BURNING AIR AFFAIR

THRUSH had condemned the world to flaming death — and only one girl stood in their path!

The New Complete U.N.C.L.E. Novel by
ROBERT HART DAVIS



The Burning Air Affair

Number III of *The Girl From UNCLE*

Robert Hart Davis

Tags:Grizli777

THE BURNING AIR AFFAIR

By Robert Hart Davis

Shackled, powerless, April heard a madman boast of his plan to rule the world. And suddenly she knew–this man could sentence the entire universe to flaming death–and only she stood in his path!

ONE

THE MISSING AGENT

Alexander Waverly, Section I member and chief of the United Network for Law and Enforcement, rubbed his hands wearily across his eyes.

For twenty-four hours he had not left his office in the headquarters of the great global crime-fighting organization known from its initials as U.N.C.L.E. The long hours had deepened the lines in Waverly's rugged face. It was a strong face, capable of sympathy, yet possessing the strength of Gibraltar.

Teenage Randy Kovac stood beside the desk console with a sheaf of reports for the chief. But Mr. Waverly kept him waiting for nearly fifteen minutes while his strong fingers played on the multi-colored buttons on the console.

At his touch communications opened up in a dozen hot spots around the world as the chief contacted his agents.

Finally he cut the last channel and leaned back. Wordlessly he took the reports Randy handed him. He did not look at them. His mind was turning over an entirely different problem.

"There is something decidedly wrong," he said slowly. "Most decidedly."

"Yes, sir?" Randy said eagerly.

"If there is something I can do, Mr. Waverly"

A suggestion of a smile crossed the chief's face.

"You might tell me where April Dancer and Mark Slate are right now," he said.

Randy's face fell. He had had visions of being sent off on a dangerous mission.

"They are more than an hour late in reporting," he said.

"Incorrect!" Mr. Waverly said in a clipped, reproving voice. "They are one hour, three minutes and twelve seconds late. In our business it is important to be precise."

"Yes, sir," Randy said, abashed. "Maybe I could go look for them, sir."

"Maybe you could, but you can't," Mr. Waverly said. "I need–"

A purple light glowed suddenly on the communications control console. The U.N.C.L.E. chief bent forward. At the same time he pressed a button that activated a recessed speaker.

"This is Number Four at the airport," a voice said. "I have checked on Miss Dancer and Mr. Slate. They came in on separate planes according to schedule and left in a cab. The cab number was checked out with the company. The driver is overdue checking in."

"Thank you," Waverly said.

"Keep me informed of all developments. This is our top priority project."

He cut the connection and looked across at the boy. For all the stone exterior he found necessary to present to U.N.C.L.E. agents, he was at heart a kindly man. He understood the boy's curiosity.

"It seems we have something of a problem, young man," he said.

"Because Miss Dancer and Mr. Slate are lost?" Randy asked.

"Not because they are lost, no," Mr. Waverly said. He picked up an unlighted pipe. "Our problem is why they are lost."

"You see," he went on, "I have been picking up reports from our operatives all over the world. They all agree on one thing: there has suddenly developed a very disturbing agitation throughout the entire THRUSH network of criminal activity. Their reports indicate that this could be the greatest threat to the world that this monstrous criminal organization has ever posed."

"Then it must be a whopper!"

Randy said. "What are they up to now?" "I do not know," Waverly said.

"We have not been able to get a single lead. We only know that there is unprecedented activity in THRUSH right now. You can see why I am worried."

"I wish I could do something about it besides just carry messages," the boy said wistfully.

Waverly smiled. "Don't discount the importance of your work here," he said. "After all, you are still an on-the-job trainee, our first. Usually we do not accept any except college graduates who have then attended our U.N.C.L.E. academy."

"I know, sir," Randy said quickly. "I realize how fortunate I am."

"And we are fortunate to have someone with your interest," Mr. Waverly said. "There is so much for you to learn. Just bear with us for a few more years. I promise that if you continue as you have, you will one day take your place in the field, along with Mr. Kuryakin and Mr. Solo."

Before Randy could reply the purple light glowed again. Mr. Waverly cut in the voice communications. The same voice Randy

heard before resumed its report.

"The missing cab was found two minutes ago by police. It was found on a side street near the East River. The driver and his passengers have disappeared. There is some blood on the back seat of the cab. That is all anyone knows at this moment."

"Are they–" Randy asked, his face turning pale.

"Be quiet!" Alexander Waverly snapped. "There is something else coming in."

A different light gleamed on the console. Waverly cut in the sound. Randy leaned forward expectantly. He looked disappointed when the only sound that came out was the purr of a running car engine.

Waverly said, "Evidently April or Mark have succeeded in getting a pen communicator working. We are probably hearing their kidnapper's car motor."

Randy understood. He knew that U.N.C.L.E. operatives carry tiny voice transmitter sets so minute they were concealed in the case of a fountain pen, requiring only the extension of a chromium antenna to put the agent in direct communications with U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

Minutes piled on minutes and they heard nothing but the rising and falling of the engine noise. Randy looked across at Mr. Waverly. The U.N.C.L.E. chief leaned back in his chair, listening with his eyes closed. He seemed completely relaxed. Then Randy noticed one tightly clinched fist and realized how much the wait and suspense were affecting the older man.

Randy glanced up at the wall clock above Waverly's head. Its ring of numbers told the time around the world. In his anxiety he had some difficulty picking out New York time. It gave him a jolt of surprise to note that it had only been fifteen minutes since they picked up the secret broadcast. To him it seemed like hours.

Then suddenly the engine noise was broken by a man's voice. It said, "What about that girl?"

"It was your fault that she got away!" another voice said savagely.

"Don't try to shove the blame on me!" the first voice snapped. "If you could have held him, then I wouldn't have–"

"Forget it! Forget it!" his companion replied. "What's done is done. I don't think she'll be able to identify us, even if the police get a lineup on us. We'll be heading for Los Angeles in an hour anyway."

"I don't know," the other voice said. Randy could easily detect the growing uneasiness in the man's tones. "This thing scares me. Of all the messes we've gotten into, this is the worst."

"Don't worry. This is top priority. THRUSH headquarters is putting everybody on this thing."

"I don't know," his companion said. "It doesn't look good, especially now that U.N.C.L.E. is getting into the act. That could delay

us. And if it does and we don't find that woman in time there won't be enough of this world left to–."

"Break it off!" his partner rasped. His own agitation showing in his voice. "We'll get her. We know this punk from U.N.C.L.E. met the woman in Los Angeles. We'll make him talk. After that, it will be easy."

"If he's the right man!"

"Stop worrying, I tell you! He's the right one. Mark Slate. I got his name off the plane manifest."

"That girl with him. I'm sure she was an U.N.C.L.E. agent too."

"So what? All we need is an hour with this jerk on the machine and we'll have all the information we need. After that U.N.C.L.E. can run around in circles chasing its own tail."

"Well, I hope we can-Oh! *Look out, Fleming*! It's-it's *him*!"

"Quick! Shoot the prisoner! Shoot Mark Slate! Don't let him get away!"

There was a crushing sound like metal twisting in a savage wreck. Then the communicator went dead.

"Oh!" Randy gasped. "Oh!"

He looked sick. Ever since he had joined U.N.C.L.E. as its first on-the-job trainee Mark Slate had been his personal hero and he had developed a schoolboy crush on lovely April Dancer. Their danger left him shaken.

"Both April Dancer and Mark Slate have been in tough spots before," Waverly said in a quiet voice that masked his own deep concern. "I am sure we can keep our confidence in them."

"If they could only have kept the pen communicator going a little longer," Randy said miserably. "We might have learned something."

"I think we learned a good deal anyway," Mr. Waverly said. "We learned that April Dancer escaped. We also learned that there is another woman involved–a woman these men seek desperately. We also learned that she has had some kind of contact with Mark Slate. And we learned that THRUSH is definitely involved."

"I wonder who the woman is?" Randy asked.

"Mr. Slate is the type of man who meets many women," Waverly said. "It will be extremely difficult to backtrack on ladies with whom he has been in contact."

"But the THRUSH man said this woman was the key to something that meant great danger to the world," Randy said. "We must find her."

"That is very true," Waverly said. "Now just one moment and we will get a report on the voice-prints."

"Voice-prints?" Randy asked, surprised.

"Yes," Mr. Waverly said.

“When a person’s voice is converted to electronic lines on an oscillograph, the lines make a characteristic pattern. Like fingerprints, the tones and nuances and timbres of our voices all have minute differences. No two are alike. I had this communicator report taped as it came in. The automatic computers are already searching our memory bank for comparisons with THRUSH agents. We will know who these men are in just a moment.”

By the time he finished speaking, verification came that the men overheard were from THRUSH. Their names were recorded and a neatly printed dossier of each accompanied the report.

Waverly read it quickly and a flick of his fingers on his bank of communication buttons and a few quiet words started the vast crime-fighting organization’s machinery to an intensive search for the two men.

Then he leaned back in his chair and thoughtfully caressed the bowl of his briar pipe.

“Odd,” he said.

“Yes, sir?” Randy said hopefully. He realized, however, that the chief was speaking only to himself.

“Yes, very odd,” Waverly repeated. “The hints those two dropped about a world danger indicated that this is something THRUSH fears.”

“Do you think, maybe,” Randy said uneasily, “that they got Mr. Slate’s pen communicator when they captured him and are tricking us?”

“In this business anything is possible,” Mr. Waverly said gloomily. “Anything.”

His seamed face took on a more gloomy aspect. “Remember this, young man–when you are fighting criminals of the caliber THRUSH employs, it is fatal to take anything for granted. We must always seek the hidden meaning behind every action, every word, and if possible, every thought of our enemy.

“THRUSH intends to dominate the world. That much we know. We know the country which is supporting these arch-criminals, but that is about all.

“We have never been able to run down the real director of this infamous group. We don’t even know what the letters in THRUSH stand for. But we do know that it is so powerful that only an international organization like U.N.C.L.E. can hope to combat its evil.”

“And now something has happened that has made THRUSH afraid,” Randy said. “Could there be a new organization so terrible that it even makes THRUSH tremble?”

“It must be something like that,” Waverly said reluctantly. “But if so, why hasn’t our operatives gotten wind of it?”

A flash of light on the U.N.C.L.E. chief’s console caused Randy to

hesitate. Waverly touched a switch and said, “Yes?”

“Carlson on number five, sir. We have a fix on April Dancer.”

“Excellent!” Mr. Waverly said. “She is walking, just entering the Fifties,” the report went on. “She is dazed. She has some of her faculties, but doesn’t recognize anyone. She failed to acknowledge any of our identification signals. When we tried to approach her, she used karate on Stevens. He has a broken leg. She almost shot Franklyn, and Singh is recovering from a blast of tear gas in his face.”

“That is quite understandable,” Mr. Waverly said quietly with only the slightest edge of sarcasm cutting through his English-sounding voice. “After all, this Amazon we’ve employed is all of five-feet-five and must weigh within an ounce of one hundred and ten pounds. We can hardly expect three mere men to handle her!”

“Well now–” the reporting agent began and then recognized the futility of trying to make excuses to the soft-speaking, but rock-hard director of U.N.C.L.E. activities.

“Yes, sir,” he ended lamely. “It will be necessary for us to render her unconscious. I’ll–”

“Never mind,” Waverly said. “If she is now walking in the Fifties, it means she is coming here.”

“Probably, sir.”

“I think she’s like a boxer we often see in the prize ring. A stunned fighter keeps slugging just from pure fighting instinct after a blow numbs his conscious senses.”

“Then we’ll keep in the background and give her protection in case she should be followed,” the agent said.

“Excellent,” Waverly said and added, “Perhaps we had better send out a squad to protect you should she get angry again!”

“Now that’s unfair! We could have used knockout gas on her but–”

“*Yes*?”

“Sorry, sir. No excuses.”

“Very well. Carry on, but put as many people along her way as is needed to keep her under surveillance every second. She may be our only lead now to the most difficult job we have ever faced.”

TWO
“FIND MARK SLATE”

Despite her disheveled hair, bruises on her face and her dirty torn dress, the girl who paused on a street corner in the lower Fifties was extraordinarily attractive.

She ignored the stares of passing men and watched the light with impatience until it turned green. A young man leered at the tear in her short skirt. He turned to follow when she hurried across the street.

Another man, tall and grim of face, stepped from a drug store entrance full in the young man's way. One look at his silent, warning face and the would-be masher went back the way he came.

Another light stopped the girl. She paused and leaned wearily against the corner of a building.

A police patrol car, cruising on the opposite side of the street, saw her.

The driver went down half a block until he could find a place to make a U-turn and started back. A man stepped off the curb. The patrolman had to brake sharply.

The pedestrian walked swiftly back to the car. A whispered word and a flash of an identification caused the police to drop interest in the girl.

Finally she turned into a small tailor shop on a certain street shadowed by the glass and steel bulk of the United Nations building.

A wrinkled gnome of a man looked up. When another customer came in right behind the girl, he said quickly, "Yes, Miss Dancer, your alterations are ready. If you will step back to the room, I'll make any additional adjustments."

The customer looked curiously at the girl. She only nodded and walked past a pressing machine. The young girl at the machine pressed a hidden button as April Dancer went by. This activated a switch which would permit a lock to open.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. went into the small booth that served the shop for a changing room. She dropped the heavy curtain behind her and turned a clothes hook on the wall.

She waited for ten heartbeats and then the wall swung in, disclosing a short, dark corridor. She stepped inside. The panel closed behind her. For a brief moment she was in total darkness while electronic surveillance devices checked her identity.

Finally the end of the short corridor opened and April Dancer stepped into a modern office reception room.

The pretty girl at the desk nodded pleasantly to April. She did not appear surprised at the girl from U.N.C.L.E.'s disheveled appearance. After working for the great crime-fighting organization for nearly two years, the receptionist had long since forgotten how to be surprised at anything or anybody who came through the secret entrance to the New York headquarters of the international organization.

There was, however, more than a touch of envy in her eyes. For a second before she went back to sorting file cards, she envisioned herself on dangerous assignments instead of just sitting at a desk.

Behind the receptionist's desk were six small elevators, each marked with the name of one of the six subdivisions of U.N.C.L.E.

There were:

SECTION I: Policy and Operations
SECTION ll: Operations and Enforcement
SECTION Ill: Enforcement and Intelligence
SECTION IV: Intelligence and Communications
SECTION V: Communications and Security
SECTION VI: Security and Personnel

The Girl took the one marked *Section II-Operations and Enforcement*. It deposited her on one of the top floors. She went straight across to the office with a plain nameplate on the door: MR. WAVERLY. She swayed slightly and paused for a moment to regain her composure before pushing the bell.

On the opposite side of the door, Mr. Waverly and Randy Kovac were watching her on a closed circuit TV screen recessed in the communications console on Waverly's desk.

"Maybe I should go help her," the youth said.

"You forget that the last men who tried to do just that ended with broken legs, scalps creased by bullets and weeping from the effects of tear gas," Waverly said dryly. "Miss Dancer is obviously able to take care of herself."

His eyes betrayed his concern. But knowing April Dancer so well, he realized she would bitterly resent any implication that she was not more than self-sufficient. Waverly sighed. This was just another of several times when he was annoyed by the girl's fierce independence.

He waited with outward patience until the automatic security scanners checked her identity again and opened the door for her.

"Won't you sit down, Miss Dancer?" he said, motioning to a chair opposite Randy.

April lowered herself down gingerly. Her manner indicated that she had taken quite a bump on an anatomical portion of her body that made sitting down not exactly a pleasure.

"I know I look a sight," she said lamely.

Mr. Waverly fought down the impulse to be solicitous. Instead he said, "You are here as an operative, Miss Dancer, not as a woman. We are more concerned with your information than your personal appearance."

"Yes, sir," April said. "I– we–"

Her head fell forward. She would have plunged from her chair had not Randy leaped to catch her. He looked uneasily at Waverly.

"Call Dr. Michaels," Waverly said.

He got up and walked over to look closely at the unconscious girl sprawled in the chair.

"I think she is only exhausted, but I do not want to take a chance," he said.

The doctor came quickly. He agreed with Waverly's diagnosis.

“I don’t want to endanger her health,” Waverly said. “But it is imperative that I question her as quickly as possible. Mark Slate’s life may depend upon it.”

“Well, she has the constitution of a lady Tarzan. She’ll snap out of it quickly. I’ll give her an injection. Give her about ten minutes for it to get through her system. Then she’ll regain consciousness automatically. It will be safe to question her then, if you don’t overdo it.”

It was a long anxious wait for the girl to open her eyes. Randy’s face mirrored his relief, but Mr. Waverly acted as if nothing had happened. He picked up the reference to her appearance as if not a second had elapsed.

“Let us forget your appearance,” he said. “What happened to you and Mr. Slate?”

For a moment April looked bewildered. It seemed to her that something had happened, but looking at Waverly’s calm face, she doubted her impression.

“I don’t–” she began.

She started to say she did not remember coming to the U.N.C.L.E. headquarters at all. But she caught herself in time to prevent such a show of what she stubbornly called weakness. She frowned, trying to recall what had happened since the attack on her and Mark Slate.

“Start at the beginning,” Waverly said quietly. “This is very important because Mr. Slate is still missing.

“Oh!” April said and half rose from her chair. “I thought Mark got away.”

“No,” Mr. Waverly said. “Now what happened?”

“Mark and I had to leave Los Angeles when our suspect in that United Nations spy case departed for New York. We traveled on different airlines in order not to arouse any suspicion that we were working together. We met as if by accident at the airport here. We took a cab together. On the way we were forced off the road by another car. It drove on and we thought it was only a drunk driver.”

“I see,” Mr. Waverly said, picking up an unlighted pipe and then putting it down again. Only by this unconscious gesture did he betray his concern.

However, April’s sharp eyes caught the movement. She sat up a little straighter in her chair. She seemed to draw strength from Waverly’s suppressed alarm.

“There were six men hidden in some bushes beside the road. They jumped us. Mark and I split to divide their attention. There was a battle.”

“From your appearance, I’d say you put up quite a struggle,” Waverly said. “You are a very tough young woman, Miss Dancer.”

April smiled wanly at him. She was more flattered than if he had told her she was beautiful.

But her smile faded as quickly as it flashed up. “Mark?” she asked, her face mirroring her deep concern for the young ex-RAF pilot who shared her dangerous missions.

“We received a sort of communication from Mr. Slate,” Waverly said. “He apparently succeeded in getting his pen-communicator in operation without his captors knowing it. We received no word from Mr. Slate himself, but we were permitted to listen in on a conversation from two men guarding him.”

He moved a selector switch on the console. The tape made from the communicator broadcast began a replay for April’s benefit.

She listened intently. Her eyes sparkled with growing excitement. Watching her, Alexander Waverly thought he had never seen any girl who thrived so much on danger. A perfect U.N.C.L.E. agent, he thought.

When the tape ran out, Mr. Waverly said, “Is there anything you saw or heard during the attack which would explain anything we heard here?”

The girl shook her head reluctantly.

“No, and it also ruins my theory of what happened,” she said. “I thought the attack was connected with the spy case Mark and I were working on. But THRUSH isn’t connected with the spy ring. This is something new.”

“And if the men we heard are sincere,” Waverly said, “the world is faced with a terrible threat. This is more important than the spy case you are working on, Miss Dancer. You will devote your full time to finding out what THRUSH is so afraid of.”

“But if THRUSH is afraid, it would seem to me that the threat to us is nonexistent,” the girl objected.

“No,” Waverly said slowly. “I have fed all the known facts we have into the computer while we waited for your arrival. We are faced with several alternative explanations. The one I favor most is that something THRUSH is developing has gotten out of hand. It is something so terrible it could destroy the entire world.”

“Then the threat to us is as great as the threat to THRUSH,” the girl said.

“That is correct,” Alexander Waverly said. “Now the conversation indicates that a woman is the key to solving this problem. And that Mark Slate has some unexplained contact with this woman. So here is your first task: Find Mark Slate!”

“Yes, sir,” April said.

It pleased Waverly that she did not ask how or for specific instructions.

"You were in contact with Mr. Slate in Los Angeles," Alexander Waverly went on. "Do you have any idea who this mysterious woman is?"

"Mark has a roving eye, you know," she said somewhat ruefully. "It might have been anyone."

"Finding her, next to rescuing Mr. Slate, is our number one project," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "This vital task must fall on your shoulders, Miss Dancer. That does not mean you are working alone. Far from it. I intend to throw the full resources of our organization on this case. I believe it that important."

"Yes, sir," April said.

"However, I have been receiving worldwide reports of unusual THRUSH activity," Waverly went on. "That means I cannot bring our people back here. The key to this thing may lie elsewhere. We must attack on every front. Once we pinpoint the source, we will pull everyone in."

"I'll find the woman for you," April said.

"How?" Mr. Waverly asked curiously.

She smiled back at him. "Somehow," she said. April got up. "If I may go now–"

Waverly hesitated, mindful of the beating she had taken. In the end he thought it best to trust to April's estimate of her own capabilities.

"As you wish," he said.

"Maybe I could go along and take Mr. Slate's place temporarily," Randy said hopefully. "Until he is rescued, of course. I wouldn't want to try to beat him out of his job."

"A noble sentiment," Waverly said dryly. "But I fear, Mr. Kovac, that I need you here."

"There'll be another time, Randy," April said, amused, yet touched by the young man's disappointment.

A light glowed on the console. "One moment, Miss Dancer. Perhaps–"

Waverly switched on the pen-communicator receiver. After an exchange of codes to prove the call genuine, April heard a voice say, "Karman Caine, a definitely identified THRUSH agent in Los Angeles, has inserted ads in both the *Times* and the *Herald-Examiner* seeking a Mrs. Felix Harvey-Lancer. Caine is posing as a lawyer seeking to settle a rich estate."

"Who is Mrs. Felix Harvey-Lancer?" Waverly asked.

"No one knows," the agent replied. "She checked into a hotel for a day and then left. No one knows where she went."

"Find her!" Waverly snapped.

"She may be the key–"

He caught a glimpse of April's half-amused, half surprised face and stopped.

"Never mind," he said into the voice receiver. "I think I can find the lady myself. You cover Caine and find out what his interest in the lady is."

After he broke the connection, Alexander Waverly looked at April again. "Am I right in assuming that you are the mysterious lady, with the hyphen?"

"Yes, sir," the girl from U.N.C.L.E. said. "I had to go to a place where there was a possibility of being recognized. So I got a red wig, lame green contact lenses for my eyes and added something else which delicacy forbids me to mention, but which put me definitely in the Jayne Mansfield class of figure."

"It was a good disguise?" Waverly asked.

"Well–!" April grinned. "I met a Mr. Mark Slate in a cocktail lounge and the line he handed me was definitely different from the one he hands April Dancer. I was flattered!"

"So you met Slate!" Waverly said speculatively. "Then you must be the one these men kidnapped Slate to find. Why are they so anxious to find you?"

"I don't know, sir," April replied. "But if they think I can help them blow up the world, they have a wrong number. I like it here."

"This is very odd. The taped conversation definitely indicates that this red-haired woman is a key factor in their fear. Yet that woman is you."

"Well, it looks like the best thing I can do is to dig out my red wig and other accessories and add a hyphen to my name," April said.

"Will you insert an ad in the personal columns of all the New York newspapers for me?" Have it read: 'Blackboard– I think our enemies can figure that out as meaning 'Slate'–'Blackboard, must get in touch with you at once. Call me Blackhawk Hotel. H-L.'"

Randy looked startled. "You're setting yourself up as a decoy to draw these men out!" he said. "You can't do that. It's too dangerous!"

April smiled. "So it is dangerous," she said. "Danger is my business, Randy."

The sparkle in her eyes showed that she loved that business.

THREE
CAUGHT

A willowy girl about twenty-three years old with flaming red hair and what Mr. Alexander Waverly would call–er–Jayne Mansfield attractions, picked up the telephone in the sitting room of an expensive suite on the seventh floor of the Blackhawk Hotel in

Manhattan.

"Yes?" she said in a voice that carried a strong Down East accent

"Mrs. Harvey-Lancer?" a pleasant voice said at the other end of the line.

"Oh, yes!" April Dancer replied "Are you the gentleman who is going to assist me in finding a place?'"

"No," the voice said regretfully.

"I am calling in regard to the ad you placed in this afternoon's *Times.* The inquiry about Mr. Mark Slate."

"Oh!" April said. She hid her elation behind a mask of suspicion. "How did you know it was I who placed the ad?"

"I didn't," he said and from his tone she could almost picture his smile. As a woman she did not find it unattractive at all. As an U.N.C.L.E. agent she sternly reminded herself to keep her mind on the job. Handsome counter-agents have been the downfall of more than one woman spy, as Alexander Waverly informed her during her training.

"Then how–" she began.

"Mr. Slate, of course," the voice said. "No one else would have recognized the initials or understood the significance of that 'Blackboard' opening. Mr. Slate is unable to call himself. He asked me to contact you and do anything–*anything* for you. Is there any way I can be of service?"

"I don't think so," April said hesitantly. "I must see Mr. Slate. It is very important."

"That can be arranged," the man said quickly. "It will be about two hours before he returns. Let me. See–it is just after dark now. Say–in two hours? If you could meet me at the Golden Ball Club–"

"I don't know about meeting a strange man," April said quickly.

"I understand," the voice said and chuckled. "Mr. Slate, of course, will be with me."

"Oh, then it will be fine," April said "I'll be there and thank you so much. You don't know how much this means! It is so important that I contact Mark."

She hung up with a smile of satisfaction and opened her purse. Rummaging through the usual junk a woman loads down her bag with, she removed an expensive looking fountain pen. She twisted the end and a thin antenna shot up several inches. A faint bleeping noise came from inside the pen-communicator, a marvel of miniaturized super-radio equipment.

Instantly a reply came directly from Alexander Waverly in U.N.C.L.E. headquarters across town.

"Yes, Miss Dancer?" he said. "The fish are nibbling at the bait, Mr. Waverly," she said. "I am to meet them at the Golden Ball in two

hours."

"Good!" the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "We will have the place surrounded. Carry on, Miss Dancer."

"Yes, sir," April said. "I–" "What is it? What is it, Miss Dancer?" Waverly called.

"The phone call was just a trap to get my attention away from the window!" she said hurriedly. "They're breaking in!"

"Miss Dancer! Don't take any chances!" Waverly said. "If–"

But April, afraid the two men rushing her would discover the secret of the pen-communicator, slammed down the antenna which cut the connection. This left Alexander Waverly talking into a dead receiver.

She whirled to confront the two men who had crept along the building ledge to force her hotel window.

They split, coming at her from two directions.

April leaped back, jerking the phone cord loose and hurling the instrument at the nearest man. It caught him in the chest. He fell with a muffled curse.

She leaped for her purse with its array of U.N.C.L.E. protective devices, but the would-be abductor grabbed her. She swung at him, a hard karate chop. It knocked him back and off balance. She grabbed the shirt front for a judo throw, but the cloth tore in her hands.

He swung a wild haymaker at her jaw. April ducked, but her foot hit the telephone she threw at the first man. She fell, sprawling back across the suite's couch.

Both men dived for her again.

She kicked the heel of her shoe and a switchblade, thin, strong and murderous, shot out of the spike heel of her shoe. She kicked her leg, aiming the blade in a murderous slash at her opponent's throat.

He dodged back. April reached down and grabbed the shoe off her foot. Holding the toe, she hurled it at the second man. The blade just barely ripped his cheek as he ducked.

For a moment the movement left him off balance. It permitted April to dodge past him. She grabbed the edge of a table and upended it in front of the other man rushing her.

She darted around him as he fell, and grabbed for her purse. But as she raised her head she saw the man on the floor aiming a queer-shaped gun at her. There was a peculiar twang as he pressed the trigger April felt a sharp sting in the calf of her leg. A strange numbness flashed out from the tiny wound. Her leg gave way. She collapsed.

The contents of her purse scattered around her. They were all things which had saved her life at one time or another–all U.N.C.L.E. protective devices.

There was the pen-communicator for instant contact with Headquarters, U.N.C.L.E.; a lipstick with a hidden hypodermic syringe to inject either knockout drops or sodium pentothal truth serum; a rattail comb which made a murderous stiletto; candy mints that threw off a blinding smoke screen when dropped in water; a compact that was actually a super-miniaturized tape recorder; a perfume dispenser that had a secret tear gas compartment; and several other similarly useful items.

As the sickening paralysis flashed over her body with alarming speed, she tried to grab the tear gas dispenser. One of the men dropped to his knees and grabbed her wrist.

April seized at his jacket, but her body was paralyzed to her waist now. With only the strength of her arms, she couldn't flip him over.

The paralysis was creeping higher, moving more slowly now that its toxin was being diluted by her blood. But it was still moving. She knew it would only be a few more seconds before she lost control of her arms as well.

When the THRUSH man jerked the tear gas dispenser from her hands she rolled over as if to get away. Actually she was covering some of the other items with her body. And under this cover, she grabbed the compact tape recorder, a package of the smoke bomb mints, and the stiletto handle comb. She managed to shove them into the pocket of the tailored jacket she wore. Then she tried to get the lipstick with its secret hypodermic syringe, but her rapidly numbing fingers couldn't grasp it.

She tried to move, but her body was immobile now. She could move nothing above her shoulders. The paralysis was creeping up her neck. She knew that she only had a few more seconds of consciousness before the end.

Already her mind was becoming hazy. She heard the two men speaking. It seemed to her that their voices came from a great distance, but she still had enough of her faculties to catch their words. The voices were familiar. It was the two men who attacked them before. She recognized the voices from the tape recording Mr. Waverly made of the pen-communicator broadcast from the kidnap car.

"You fool!" one snarled. "You were told not to use that damned numbing gun on her. It may interfere with the interrogation machine getting a correct answer from her. That thing is touchy. Any undetermined factor cranked in can upset its delicate balance."

"What could I do?" the other said in an aggrieved tone. "She was digging in that purse. I thought she had a gun in it. I couldn't take any chances."

"You are paid to take chances. This is serious. We must find out what this damned woman did with that 'trigger bomb' or we'll all end

up shoveling coal to keep hell's fires burning."

"Let's argue tomorrow or next year. I want to get out of here before something goes wrong," his companion said.

"Okay, but just remember: you take the blame for numbing her."

"Sure! Sure, but give me a hand, will you?"

As they stooped to pick her up, one of the men felt the objects in her jacket pocket.

Very dimly she heard him say, "What's this?" His voice was sharp.

"A powder compact and a package of mints," his companion said. "And a comb. Nothing important."

"Wait a minute!" the other man said. "The handle on that comb looks pretty sharp and rigid. Yes it is! That thing is a genuine frog sticker!"

The two men looked at each other. "Just what I tried to tell you. This girl is a professional. Take a look at that perfume dispenser. When I took it away from her I thought she was just going to throw it at us. I'm not so sure now."

Then, so faint it was dreamlike to her numbing mind, April heard the THRUSH agent exclaim, "The damned thing can throw out tear gas! This kid's no amateur. Take a look at those other objects."

"This one is just mints. Nothing there. And this–"

He snapped open the compact. He removed the tiny powder puff and looked at the powder cake. The printed circuit was a flat sheet behind the mirror and added only an infinitesimal thickness to the lid. The recording head with its wire-thin tape and drive shaft was also a flat sheet under the powder container. The battery, even smaller than the cell used in electric watches, was concealed in the hinge.

The whole assembly was not detectable without completely dismantling the ingenious device. The THRUSH man snapped the lid shut and stuck the compact back in April's pocket.

The girl's head sagged. She made one last tremendous effort to fight off unconsciousness and failed …

April Dancer opened her eyes. She turned her head. For a moment she had difficulty placing where she was. Then the wild fight in the hotel room came back to her. She sat up, gingerly flexing legs and arms. Except for a curious tingling through her entire body, she felt no ill effects from the numbing pellet shot into her leg by the THRUSH agent.

She looked around. She was in a small room, tastefully decorated; she was on a couch under a large oil painting of a Bavarian mountain scene.

There was a door across from her. April walked over to it. To her surprise it wasn't locked. She looked out. There was a long corridor. A

man was coming down it. He saw her and smiled.

"Hi!" he said and waved his hand in a friendly manner.

"I hope you feel better, Mrs. Harvey-Lancer," he said as he approached.

April Dancer recognized the voice. It was the friendly soul who called her to the telephone to detract her attention while the two THRUSH men broke in through her hotel window.

"Yes, thank you," she said, looking at him curiously.

Surprisingly, his friendly, open face looked just exactly as she had pictured him after hearing his voice on the phone. It was a strong face, definitely not that of a weakling. From his friendly appearing face past his muscular shoulders to his athletic legs, he was the kind of man any woman would be attracted to.

"I deeply regret the inconvenience this has caused you, Mrs. Ha– Must I say all that name again? Can't I just call you Harve or Lance or something?"

April found herself warming to his friendliness despite her knowledge that he was a man from THRUSH.

"Well," she said with a smile as bright as his own, "you may call me Cynthia, if you will permit me to call you Hank, or Pete or Steve or something appropriate."

"You are not even warm," he said with a sad shake of his head. "It's Mike, Cynthia. And you are welcome to it."

"Okay, Mike. Now that we are old friends, why don't you just tell me just as one pal to another what all this means?"

"Of course," he said. "You know of course, Mr. Slate's business and the danger he runs."

"So?" April said noncommittally. "These men who kidnapped you were after him also. Fortunately we were able to overcome them," he said.

"Really?" April said. "And where then is Mr. Slate?"

"We will meet him presently," Mike said. "Unfortunately, he received the same numbing injection you did. Since he was struck later, he has not yet regained consciousness. At least he hadn't when I left. Would you like to go with me? We'll check on the young man."

"Thank you, but no."

"No? Why not?"

"Because, Mike, you are the most charming–"

The smile broadened on the THRUSH man's face and then froze when April added: "charming liar I have ever met."

"Liar? Really, Cynthia! I-" There was a steely look in April's eye that stopped him. He sighed and shrugged.

"Well, you can't blame a fellow for trying," he said.

"And what were you trying, Mike?" she asked, her level gray eyes

boring into him.

"To put you at your ease," he said. "See, I can be honest when pinned down."

"So I would make a better subject under your interrogation machine?" She asked quietly.

Mike looked startled. His smile ebbed and it left his face with an entirely new cast. He no longer appeared so trustworthy or even so friendly.

"How did you know about that?"

His voice was still quiet but it carried a sinister, even frightened undertone.

"Oh, I don't know," April said airily. "I pick up things here and there."

"It seems you do," he said in an odd voice. "We thought this machine was super secret. Less than six people know about it."

"Seven," April said. "You forgot me."

"No, Cynthia–if that is your name. I've not forgotten you. You are not the kind a man forgets, I'll assure you of that. Will you come with me?"

"No," April said.

"It will be a very simple matter to force you. Why make it hard on yourself? You are going. You have no choice."

"If you put it that way–" April said and smiled at him.

He gave her a questioning look and his puzzled uneasiness was reflected on his face. April took an almost gleeful pleasure in his uncertainty. She knew she had him off-balance. Her familiarity with the super-secret interrogation machine made him wonder what else she knew.

They walked down the hall together. Mike was deep in thought. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. preserved an outward calm she was far from feeling inside. She understood only too well her danger, and even more important, the danger to U.N.C.L.E., if the interrogation machine did successfully probe her mind.

Mike politely opened the door for her. The room was painted white and all the objects in it were white. Soft, indirect light helped make everything blend together. The machine reminded April of an overgrown dentist's chair surmounted by a fantastic array of dull white tubes.

As April looked around uneasily, another door opened. A small, nervous man entered. During the seconds the door was open, April glimpsed an extraordinarily long room jammed with rows of computing machines. She touched the tape recorder in her pocket, starting it.

"Where am I" April asked Mike.

“In the headquarters of an organization as devoted to its ideals as any patriotic group,” he said.

The little man came over to them.

“Is this the subject?” he asked shortly.

Mike frowned. “This is Mrs. Harvey-Lancer,” he said.

The little man shrugged. His wrinkled monkey face looked unpleasantly at her.

“What difference does it make who she is?” he said in a sober voice. “Sit down, please.”

April shook her head and the action made the room spin. Details were growing more indistinct. She realized that she had been drugged again, but had no idea how. She would have fallen had not Mike caught her. As she sagged in his arms, her last conscious recollection was the little man saying, “This may kill her, you know!”

FOUR
THE MIND DREDGER

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. turned fitfully. She rolled over and for a moment hung precariously on the edge of the couch. She opened her eyes and looked at the walls of the room. It was where she first found herself after the kidnapping from her hotel suite by the two THRUSH operatives.

She felt strange. It wasn’t weariness exactly, although kin to it. It was almost as if by some odd means something had depressed her vitality. She moved her legs and the action made her tired.

April Dancer turned, not realizing in the fog of awakening that she was so close to the edge of the couch. She tumbled off. It wasn’t a hard bump, but the effort to get up required too much for her depleted condition. She closed her eyes and continued to lie there.

Slowly her disordered mind started to pick up the shattered remnants of memory. She realized that the condition of her body came from her ordeal in the interrogation machine.

A sudden stab of fear cut through April. The jolt of adrenalin in her blood did something to counteract the sag of her normally splendid vitality.

April sat up with difficulty. Her initial jab of fear increased, but it was not for herself. It was for U.N.C.L.E. and those she worked with there. The fear came from considering what she might have revealed under the merciless probing of the electronic third degree.

She looked around. There was a decorator’s mirror on the wall. She suspected that it was a two-way affair and that a THRUSH spy was watching her from the other side.

The girl agent caught a glimpse of her face. It was pale. Her hair was tangled. Her lipstick was smeared. There was nothing she could

do about it, since she lost her lipstick and comb when they brought her here. But she took her finger and smoothed out her lips as best she could.

Then, using her fingers for a comb, she succeeded in making her hair look attractive.

She was certain that a man was watching her. It gave her a perverse pleasure to suspect that he was smiling and making a sappy remark to himself about the vanity of women.

Well, it was some of that, she admitted to herself. A girl's appearance is part of her stock-in-trade and always has been. But there was far more behind her actions than just an attempt to look attractive to her enemies.

The improvised toilette gave April Dancer an excuse to search her pockets for something to help her. She removed the package of mints which exploded into a smoke screen when dropped in water and the powder compact with its sub-miniature tape recorder.

April inspected her lips in the compact mirror and made an additional touchup with her little finger. Her head nodded. She feigned a weariness even beyond what she felt. She leaned back on the bed, the open compact in her hand. She closed her eyes, but her index finger gently pressed a hidden button which activated the recorder's replay. She turned her head restlessly, bringing her ear right against the compact so she could hear the very faint playback. She started to breathe deeply like a person in a hard sleep.

"–may kill her, you know!"

It was the little monkey man who operated the THRUSH interrogator. These were the last words she consciously remembered before the THRUSH drug numbed her mind.

"It is a chance we have to take," April heard Mike's voice say.

It was no longer a friendly voice. It was hard, cruel and held a touch of uneasy fear.

"It is imperative that we find out what she did with that damned trigger bomb. I personally saw Franklyn Royce slip it into her hand bag there in the cocktail lounge in Los Angeles. But she definitely did not have the thing when she got to her hotel."

"This interrogator is not perfected. It has some serious flaws," the little operator said. "It has a deadly way of sapping vitality. It can kill."

"This woman is as strong as an ox," Mike said irritably. "You should get tangled with her in a fight. She almost whipped two men twice her size. She has vitality to spare."

"Well–" the little monkey of a man replied. "I don't know. Shall I push to the limit?"

"Push as hard as necessary to find out what we must know. We

were closing in on Royce. He knew it and slipped the bomb to her. She must have been his accomplice, but she apparently double-crossed him. She left with the bomb. I know Royce is moving heaven and earth to find her. He placed ads in the Los Angeles papers seeking knowledge of her. He used a false name of a fictitious lawyer, Karman Caine."

"If she has knowledge of this, the machine will bring it out. It is impossible for anyone to hold back anything. However, you must frame your questions correctly. The machine does not think. It can find out only what you ask for."

"Can an exceptionally strong willed person overcome the machine's probing, as they sometimes can do with lie detectors?"

"No, nothing can be held back. However, as I told you, the machine still has numerous imperfections. "

"I can't help that! We must know. Don't you understand?"

"No, I don't!" the little man cried. "You are forcing me to move before I am ready. If I had another week to make adjustments, I could guarantee results. As it is, I am not concerned with this woman's life. But I am concerned that the machine does not make a poor showing. It could mean cancellation of the project after all I've sacrificed for it."

"Damn the machine, the woman and you!" Mike cried. "Can't you get it through your fool head that we face the most serious threat the world has ever known?"

"But my machine–"

April, with her ear pressed against the recorder, felt a stirring of hope. If the two THRUSH men got to fighting, there might be a chance for her to turn the little man's resentment to her advantage.

She suddenly realized that her growing excitement had caused her to clinch one fist. She relaxed slowly, fearful that the watching spy might realize that she was not asleep at all.

"There won't be a machine or a you or I if we don't get our hands on that damnable bomb before Royce recovers it," Mike's voice went on from the recording. "Let me explain to you:

"This man Franklyn Royce worked for the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. He is extremely brilliant, but completely unstable. He is suffering from a persecution complex."

In a rapid burst of words April heard Mike tell how Royce, angered at a fancied failure of his superiors to appreciate his genius, detected to Russia. Then, because he was not made chief of the Russian scientific teams, he defected again to join THRUSH.

Here again his instability was his undoing. He tried to organize a revolt to place himself head of THRUSH. In failing, he narrowly escaped with his life. But in doing so, he got away with the working model of a deadly weapon known as the trigger bomb.

"This bomb was developed to set up a chain reaction in steel," Mike said. "But what we didn't know was that it is even more potent in air. The terrible thing is no larger than an ordinary .45 caliber bullet, but when fired in the air, it can set off a nuclear chain reaction. And nothing can stop it as long as there is air to feed it. And there is air everywhere! If this thing is fired, all the air in the world will burn in one tremendous global explosion. The earth will become a new sun!"

"This man Royce is trying to bluff you," the little scientist said contemptuously. "He can't fire this thing. It would kill him as well as all the rest of us."

"You don't know Royce," Mike said, his voice shaking with agitation. "He has a hunger for power worse than Adolf Hitler's megalomania. He is maniacally depressed when he is frustrated. Twice he tried to commit suicide. He wants this weapon to blackmail himself into power.

"How is immaterial. He just wants, craves, must have supreme power. When he fails, he starts thinking of suicide, as he did when he failed in his bid to become Russian chief scientist. And what more spectacular way for such a man to kill himself than to die with the world?"

"I can't believe–"

"Hitler was that way, you remember. He was willing to drag everyone down to death with him."

"Yes!" the little man said in a strangled voice. "I remember Hitler. There are men who would rather destroy the world than to— -"

"Now you see why it is so important that we learn from this girl what she did with that trigger bomb. We know Royce slipped it in her bag. We know she did not have it when she got back to the Los Angeles hotel. We know she did something with it. We know Royce is frantically trying to recover it. We must get that bomb–*or all of us will die*!"

"I-I'll do what I can," the THRUSH scientist said, shaken.

There was a silence and then some strange crackling and humming noises as the machine apparently went into orderly operation. April suppressed a shiver.

She distinctly recalled the incident Mike spoke of. At the time it seemed so trivial she dismissed it from her mind. She had taken the disguise of the red-haired widow, Mrs. Felix Harvey-Lancer, as part of her pursuit in the U.N.C.L.E. spy case. While waiting in the Los Angeles cocktail lounge, she saw Mark Slate enter. In a mischievous moment, she struck up a barroom flirtation with her co-agent just to see if her disguise was good enough to fool him.

During the evening, a drunk brushed against her. Looking down

she saw that her purse was open. She thought it was a pickpocket. Fearful that one of her U.N.C.L.E. protective devices had been stolen, she went to the ladies lounge to check. Nothing was missing, but she found what appeared to be a .45 bullet.

She thought it some evidence a gangster needed to get rid of before being arrested. Not in a position to get involved and delay her spy chase, April dropped it in the humus packed around the base of a potted plant in the lounge.

What had become of it? April shivered. Perhaps it was still there. If she betrayed the hiding place to the THRUSH men, at least they understood its danger. But there was always the possibility that Royce had gotten it back himself.

The strain was beginning to tell on her. It was difficult to keep from shivering as she listened to the answers she gave under the stimulating rays of the new machine.

She heard the THRUSH man ask: “What is your name?”

She answered: “April Dancer.” “Are you a spy or counter espionage agent?”

“Yes.” April noticed that her voice was low and strained.

“For whom do you Work?”

“U.N.C.L.E.”

There was an exclamation of surprise from both men.

“This is wonderful!” the little scientist’s voice broke in. “We will be able to learn enough from her to destroy that infernal organization!”

“Later!” Mike rasped. “Right now the important thing is the trigger bomb. I must know what she did with it. If U.N.C.L.E. found it, they will destroy the monstrous thing. We will be safe. If she didn’t–! Then there is the terrible possibility that Royce regained it.”

“Then ask her!” the little man cried impatiently. “These rays penetrate and stimulate certain parts of the body. This causes frictions in breathing and heartbeat. Every minute you wait, the chances of the rays killing her becomes more certain. “

“I’m trying to think!” Mike said miserably.

“Think later! We must hurry and get all the information we can before she dies!”

It seemed to the listening girl that Mike had been afraid to ask the question. Now he said in a voice that shook slightly: “Does U.N.C.L.E. have the trigger bomb?”

April Dancer heard herself say no. The intake of both men’s breaths was clearly audible on the recording.

“Then Royce either has it or has a chance to recover the thing,” Mike said in a dull voice.

“Perhaps she is a double agent,” the little scientist said. “If she had the thing from Royce, she may be his secret partner.”

“It could be,” Mike said. He ad-dressed the girl under the ray machine: “Do you know Franklyn Royce?”

“No,” April’s reply on the recorder.

There was a dead silence from the two men. Then Mike said harshly to the little scientist: “What in hell is the matter with that stupid machine?”

“Ask her again.”

“Are you working with Franklyn Royce?”

“No.” April’s voice was barely a whisper.

“She’s fading out on us. It will kill her if we go much longer,” the little monkey of a man warned.

“Haven’t you even seen Franklyn Royce?” Mike asked, his voice growing desperate.

“No.” The answer was so faint the recorder scarcely picked it up.

“That’s all!” the little man snapped. “She will die if we go any longer.”

“Then let her die!” Mike cried, his voice savage with desperation and frustrated fear. “I’ve got to get at the bottom of this!”

“We can get nothing more out of her. Let her rest. Give her a sedative and we’ll try again under more favorable conditions.”

“But every moment lost–”

“It can’t be helped,” the scientist insisted. “Believe me! I know this machine.”

“It’s a fake! I know she knows this man. I saw them together!”

“That is possible. I warned you not to get any of that numbing serum in her blood. It upsets the ray penetration and can give false readings. We may get an entirely different answer after it is expelled from her blood.”

“What about the knockout gas you gave her?”

“That is a different material,” the old man said. “However, just to be sure, we’ll question her fully conscious next time.”

“I suppose you are right,” Mike said miserably. “But the situation is getting desperate. What about this man Mark Slate? There was definitely a connection between the two of them. Can’t we question him now?”

“He is still under almost complete influence of the numbing serum. He attempted to escape. He had to be brought down with the serum gun.”

Mike cursed. “Everything is going wrong!”

“I am sure that on the next interrogation we will get vital information about the U.N.C.L.E. setup. That alone will make all of this worthwhile,” the little man said. “I am sure the division chief will be so pleased it will mean promotion for both of us.”

“A fat lot of good a promotion will do us if we’re all burned up!”

"We aren't burned yet," the old man said. "I worked with Royce. I know how he operates. He'll threaten and bluster first. He'll overplay his hand. You'll have an opportunity to trip him up."

Mike said something April could not catch. Then the old man said contemptuously, "What you are afraid of is that the division director will blame you for letting Royce slip through your fingers!"

"Damn you!" Mike said in a choked voice.

"Don't threaten me! I'll–"

"You'll what? I am your only chance to recover from your error and escape punishment for your incompetency! I suggest you treat me with a little more courtesy!"

"I-I'm sorry," Mike said bitterly.

"Good! You may wonder why I, Rottermund, the great scientist, even bother to worry with you. It is this. I am interested in what this U.N.C.L.E. spy can be forced to tell us about her organization. You see, I know Alexander Waverly. I know him very well. Many years ago in England, when we were both young men,–well, I made a mistake. It was in his power to over, look it. He refused and ever since I have had to slink along the back alleys of life and the world."

"If Royce isn't liquidated, it won't matter anymore."

"It matters to me!" the old man cried. "I want to kill Waverly with my own hands. You can help me if I can get the right information from this U.N.C.L.E. agent. Help me and I'll help you get the information you need to keep the division director from handling your bungling in the manner it should be handled."

"I'll help you," Mike mumbled grudgingly.

"Good!" the THRUSH scientist said. "Now get this hunk of clay back to her room. In three hours we'll try again. And this time I am sure Miss April Dancer will tell us both what we need to know!"

FIVE
THE DESPERATE CHANCE

When the tape recording ran its course, April Dancer closed her eyes and tried to think. She realized full well how desperate her situation was. It frightened her that she was in a position where she could be forced to betray every U.N.C.L.E. secret she knew.

The recording had revealed clearly that it was impossible to keep back anything from the probing, compulsive force of the interrogation machine.

U.N.C.L.E., of course, had thousands of secrets about which she knew nothing. But at the same time, there were plenty that she did know, had to know in order to do her job. For one thing, she could be forced to reveal every major office location U.N.C.L.E. had worldwide.

Even worse, it was more than possible that they could dredge enough from her mind to set a trap for Mr. Waverly. She could think of several ways it could be done.

There was nothing April Dancer could do at the moment, but she knew that she had to do something. Even if she had to kill herself, she knew she was not going to betray U.N.C.L.E. and especially Alexander Waverly, who had given her the chance she wanted so badly.

Once this resolution was made, April felt better. As she lay back, resting and renewing her strength, her busy mind was turning over a dozen fantastic plans to escape. She had a strong, athletic body encased in her willowy form and it helped her recover rapidly from her ordeal.

As the strength flowed back into her, April's optimism rose in proportion. She could see Alexander Waverly's stern lined face lecturing to the U.N.C.L.E. academy: "No matter how desperate a situation may seem, there is *always* a way out. If you do not have the ability and ingenuity to find that way, there is no place for you in U.N.C.L.E."

As she thought of that, April smiled faintly as she also recalled what Illya Kuryakin told her when she asked him what to do about a problem presented to the academy students.

She remembered how he grinned at her.

"Honey." she remembered him saying. "When you can't think of a blessed thing to do, then roll up your sleeves, double your fists and go at them swinging. It may not be the smart thing to do, but it is better than nothing. Doing nothing will get you nothing but a lot more nothing. Anything is better than that!"

"Well," April said to herself. "We'll see how well Kuryakin's law works!"

Still sure that she was being watched through the two-way mirror, April went through the motions of waking up. She swung her trim legs off the couch and stood up. She was elated to find little evidence of her previous weakness. The many hours she spent golfing, riding and swimming were working to her advantage now.

However, she thought it prudent to go through the motions of staggering. A key portion of her rapidly forming plan of attack depended upon keeping the enemy thinking her too weak to furnish a physical threat.

After two years with U.N.C.L.E. she had begun to take the organization's protective devices for granted. Now she realized how much they all depended on these wonderful and ingenious gadgets.

It would have been so simple to tune in the pen-communicator and report directly to Mr. Waverly. Then the triangle locator beams from the U.N.C.L.E. direction finder could have pinpointed her location

from the transmitting beams.

For a moment she felt almost naked without them. She took a deep breath and thought wryly: “There’s nothing left but to apply Kuryakin’s law: Roll up your sleeves and wade into them.”

For a long moment she stood in the center of the room, turning over the only possibilities left to her. She had the smoke screen mints left, but there was no one to blind with them but herself. The compact-tape recorder had served its purpose well in revealing what had gone on at the electronic interrogation, but was of no use now.

Then a sudden thought struck her. The recorder was no help now, yet perhaps the information she gained from it could be the slim key to unlock the doors between her and freedom.

April was used to making split-second decision. Once the idea flashed through her mind, the girl did not hesitate. Her quick mind had instantly grasped the possibilities.

The details could be worked out as each succeeding emergency arose. And she knew they would arise.

April Dancer turned and faced the mirror. She was positive that it was a two-way spy affair. It was not quite as bright as it should have been, betraying the fact that some of the light striking its smooth surface was not being reflected back. It was going through to provide a view through the glass for the spy on the other side.

“Mike,” she said quietly, “I’m ready to make a deal with you.”

There was no sound from the other side. For an anxious moment April wondered if she had made a mistake in assuming she was being watched.

She took a deep breath and tried again. This time she played an ace to see what she could drag in.

“Mike!” she snapped impatiently. “I don’t have time to play around and be coy. I’ll put it on the line. You want the trigger bomb. You won’t get it except from me! You can see now how effective that third degree toy is.”

The mirror shook and swung back on silent hinges. Mike’s head and shoulders were framed by the hole in the wall. He stared at her. His face was drawn and white. He was no longer the handsome, friendly man she had known before. The friendly enemy had degenerated into a haunted, fear gnawed shell of a man.

“You know about the bomb,” he said in a furtive voice, “Then you were able to beat Rottermund’s machine!”

“Of course!” April said contemptuously. She tossed her head and the red shoulder-length hair swung provocatively about her face. She had not dared wear a wig as she had in Los Angeles, but had dyed her hair for this mission.

“You know where it is?” he asked in a choked voice.

April kept her face impassive, struggling to hide the contempt any vital woman feels for a weak man.

"Yes," she said.

"That's enough to buy your freedom," he said quickly. "Tell–"

"No!" she snapped. "I'm not selling out that cheap. I've got to betray U.N.C.L.E. The price for that is going to be high."

He hesitated. His face turning ugly. "Are you trying–?"

April Dancer broke into his suspicious outburst.

"I want to do what Royce is trying to do!" she cried, her dark eyes snapping.

He stared at her with his mouth slack.

"It's impossible!" he said.

"For me alone, yes," she said. "But you and I together. It has to be that way. We will be working against both THRUSH and U.N.C.L.E. I understand my organization. I don't know enough about yours. Together we can do it! We can blackmail both of them into submission!"

His face flushed and then went pale. "We couldn't do it!" he whispered.

"Of course we can! Royce is doing it, isn't he? THRUSH is not going to let him get away with this mad scheme to commit world suicide. They'll give in to him. They must, or die themselves."

Mike's pale face was wet with sweat. His features twisted in agony as he struggled in his mind.

April goaded him more deeply. "You've got to do it!" she whispered, the urgency of her voice driving the words hard into him. "You've failed in this thing. And you know the price of failure in THRUSH. If they have to make an agreement with Royce, you'll pay for your failure with your life. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes!" he whispered.

"Then strike first! Let them make their deal with us! We can get anything we want! Power! Money! Anything! And they won't dare double-cross us. We'll keep the bomb. All we'll sell is a promise not to use it!"

"They'll know we'd be bluffing. We couldn't–"

"But if we could make them think we're as crazy as Royce, then they would believe!" she whispered. "They believe Royce is mad enough to burn the air if he doesn't get his way. They believe that, don't they?"

"Yes–they believe it!"

"And they'll believe you if you pretend to be as crazy as Royce!"

He licked his lips. He started to sweat heavily, the big drops running slowly across his forehead.

April watched him narrowly. She was sure now he would help her.

His spirit and courage had rotted under the acid fear of THRUSH's reprisal for his failure to re-obtain the trigger bomb. She was sure he would begin to work with her, but she was just as sure he would crack at the first tough resistance they encountered in getting free of the THRUSH headquarters building.

April Dancer knew that to be successful in turning his craven fear to her own advantage she must work fast.

"Of course it will succeed," she said, forcing a confidence into her voice to help stiffen the THRUSH man's sagging spine. "And we can force them to give us anything we want! What do you want?"

"Just to get from under this awful fear," he said weakly.

"I want to be Queen of England!" April said fiercely. "I want to sit on the throne! I want the crown jewels to glow on my head. I want the people to bow to me!"

"You're c–" he broke off.

"Call it what you will!" she snapped, closely watching his face for every reaction. "This is my price for your life! Going with me is the only way you can save yourself from THRUSH's vengeance!"

He shuddered and licked his lips. "I'll get you out of here."

"That's all I need," she said crisply. "The rest I can do myself, with your knowledge of THRUSH to guide me. There is one other thing. I'll need this man Mark Slate to help me. We must take him with us."

"No!" he said explosively.

"You're trying to trick me! This man is your lover. You want to double-cross me! I'll be shoved out!"

Instantly April realized she had made a most serious mistake. Yet she couldn't abandon Mark. She thought for a moment.

"Forget him," she said crisply, deciding she would have to backtrack for the moment. She was determined, however, not to leave without her co-agent. "It may be more difficult, but we can do it, you and l alone!"

"Just a minute," Mike said. Now that he had made a decision, he looked less fearful. "I'll come around and get you. We'll have to move fast. If that little devil Rottermund–!"

"Yessss–"

The word was almost a snake's hiss. Mike whirled around. April saw with despair that the little THRUSH scientist was framed by a suddenly opening door behind Mike. He held a weapon in his hand that looked to April like a futuristic model of a gun.

Mike opened his mouth and then closed it. The despair on his face showed that he knew his end had come. In the final moments of his life the THRUSH traitor managed to find some remnants of courage left in his shivering body. He hurled himself at Rottermund. The weapon in the little scientist's hand hissed. A tiny missile leaped from

the barrel, streaking a thin trail of fire.

It struck in Mike's belly and exploded. April's last chance to escape exploded with it as the renegade fell with a hole the size of a melon blasted in his dead body.

"Miss Dancer," Rottermund said, "I of course listened to your entire conversation with this fool. I must compliment you on your perception. You are quite an intelligent young woman."

April swallowed and tried hard to keep her voice steady when she replied, "Thank you, Dr. Rottermund."

"But you made one error, my dear," he went on. His little monkey face twisted in a sneer. "The machine is not a failure. It works perfectly . You see–"

He paused and laughed softly. "I made just a minute adjustment of the ray source halfway through the interrogation. I didn't want Mr. Michaels to learn anything which would restore him to favor with our THRUSH division commander, Miss Dancer. I wish to be the one who gets the credit for determining the hiding place of the trigger bomb."

April forced herself to smile. "You are very clever, Dr. Rottermund," she said. "You are the kind of man I love to work with. Perhaps we could–"

"Yes, Miss Dancer," the little scientist said and chuckled as he looked down at the dead man. "It is not necessary for you to say any more. I understand you perfectly."

"Excellent, Dr. Rottermund," April said. "We–"

"I understand you *too* perfectly," the THRUSH scientist cut in. "You are very persuasive. You are very clever. You are very lovely. But unfortunately, Miss Dancer, your charms are lost on me. I am a woman-hater!"

"Is it necessary for us to like each other to work together?" April asked quickly.

"I do not need anything from you except a lead to the location of the trigger bomb, Miss Dancer," Rottermund said. "And I have the perfect means, of course, of finding that out."

Keeping the gun trained on her through the mirror hole, he stepped back and pressed a recessed button. The wall of April's cell slid back.

He made a motion with the gun. "If you will be so kind, Miss Dancer, as to accompany me–"

April hesitated. For one desperate moment she considered throwing herself at Rottermund, but she fought down the impulse. It would be suicide. Mike had been closer than she was to the little monkey of a man and Rottermund had cut him down.

There was always the chance that he would hesitate to kill her and lose the only lead they had to the missing bomb. Rottermund smiled

as this thought flashed through her mind.

"This is a very unique weapon, Miss Dancer," he said. "There are three adjustments I can make with a flick of my thumb. It can blast a hole like I made in this fool. Or it can fire a regular bullet. Or it can shoot a plastic pellet needle-thin with the power to stun."

"It seems, Dr. Rottermund, that there is nothing I can do," April said.

The THRUSH scientist smiled at the girl from U.N.C.L.E. "You are absolutely correct. Now if you will move ahead of me, we will find out what exactly is hidden inside that –I suppose some men would say pretty head of yours."

April Dancer hesitated only the briefest second. She turned and picked up the compact with its hidden recorder. She flipped open the lid and surveyed her makeup. She grimaced.

"I look a sight to be accompanying a gentleman," she said.

"Your appearance does not impress me. I am interested only in your mind," Rottermund said, grimacing with distaste.

April made a wry face as she turned to march ahead of the evil man to the interrogation room. Practically every man she met complimented her on her beauty and appearance. It had happened so often that it had come to irritate her. As she once informed Mark Slate, "I'm sick of men telling me I'm pretty. I know what I look like. I have a mirror. If somebody wants to really flatter me, he could say I have a fine mind."

But now that she had at last found a man more interested in her mind than in her body, April was far from flattered. In fact, she found it chilling.

The lovely agent had difficulty suppressing a shiver as she marched ahead of him into the white room from which he never intended for her to come out of alive.

SIX

KURYAKIN'S LAW!

Mark Slate was so close to April that he could have heard her had not the laboratory walls been soundproofed. As it were, he was in the dark, literally and figuratively.

There was not even a mote of light in the room where he was held prisoner. After regaining consciousness on a couch, he made a blind circuit of the room. It was totally empty, but for himself and the couch.

He sat down and tried to puzzle out his predicament. It was the oddest situation he had found himself in since leaving the RAF to join U.N.C.L.E.

He gingerly felt the lump on his head. It helped him decide that if he ever wanted to celebrate his thirty-second birthday, he had best find a way out of that dark cell fast.

Mark thoughtfully smoothed the waistcoat which would have been a loud color had there been light by which to see color.

Although a casual man in the face of danger, he was never foolhardy. He liked to know exactly what he was going into. This time he found himself at a blank wall. For the first time on any case he did not know what he was involved with or what motivated his enemies.

Methodically he stretched out on the couch and reviewed what had happened to him since he and April Dancer were ambushed after their taxi was forced off the road.

Mark Slate had been brought to this secret hideout. On the way, although bound and gagged, he managed to get his fingers on the pen-communicator. He extended the antenna sufficiently to he hoped provide Alexander Waverly and U.N.C.L.E. headquarters with an on-the-spot broadcast by his captors.

As best he could tell from the turns and stops of the car, Mark had been taken to a hideout somewhere in Manhattan.

An extremely friendly-faced man had attempted to question him, but when Mark made a break for freedom, had shot him in the leg with something that produced a creeping paralysis.

That was all the young man knew until he awoke in this lightless room. The attempt at interrogation had given Mark Slate a slight hint of information. Now he regretted trying to jump his captors too soon.

Had he let them question him a little longer he might have learned something.

As it were, all Mark knew was that he was supposed to be an

intimate acquaintance of a red-haired woman who had stolen a bomb of some kind. And from the remarks passed by his captors in the car, this bomb was a source of great fear to THRUSH.

The darkness was oppressive. It seemed to close in on him with a crushing weight. Unable to sit still any longer, he got up, jamming his fists into the pocket of his tweed jacket. As far as he could see, the only bright spot in the picture was that April had apparently gotten away. This much he gathered from the conversation of his captors as they drove him to this hidden prison.

Once again he started an inch-by-inch exploration of the room. But this time, as he moved along the opposite side, the wall suddenly disappeared. He could feel its hardness beneath his outstretched hands, but it had suddenly become transparent.

He looked into a white room. In the center was what appeared to be a futuristic design for a dentist's chair. Suspended above it were shining white beam generators with dull white lenses. Beyond the small room a partially opened door revealed banks of computers.

There was a man and a woman in the room. The man, small and monkey-faced, wore a white smock. The girl with him looked vaguely familiar. Then he realized with a start that she was the red-haired woman who had mocked his attempts at a pickup in a Los Angeles cocktail lounge just before he and April left Los Angeles.

The man removed his finger from a switch on the console box beside the chair. Mark suspected that this was what caused the wall's opaqueness to fade away.

Curiously, the visibility seemed to be only on his side, something like a one-way mirror effect. Twice the girl turned in his direction, but did not seem to see him at all.

When the girl turned he caught a full view of her face for the first time. He started. His heart began to race and a low exclamation escaped his taut lips.

It had been dark, low-key lighted in the cocktail lounge. Here in the brighter light of the interrogation room he detected a dozen telltale points that convinced him that the red-haired girl was really April Dancer.

Mark Slate leaned his hands against the transparent wall and chuckled softly.

"That girl is a marvel," he told himself. "I wonder how she managed to talk her way in here?"

Then the little man half turned and Slate saw the strange gun for the first time. The chuckle died on Mark's lips. His changing expression showed his sudden concern for April. Ever since they had started to work together two years before, he had taken a big-brother attitude toward her. Perhaps it might have gone farther than that, but

April was so wrapped up in her job with U.N.C.L.E. that romance had no part in her life.

Motioning April to move over where he could keep her in his view while he looked toward the wall that hid Mark, Rottermund pressed another button on the console. A hidden tape recorder began a replay of the interrogation of April.

When it was concluded, Rottermund said, “Did you hear that, Mr. Slate?”

April started at the mention of her co-agent’s name. Mark noted the look of concern that flashed across her face.

“Yes,” he said in answer to Rottermund’s question. “I heard it.”

“You realize then the utter futility of trying to fight me?” Rottermund said.

Before Mark could reply, April cried, “Don’t believe him, Mark! He’s trying to trap you! You still have enough of that numbing serum in your blood to partially counteract the machine’s rays. You can upset the machine if you fight it. He is trying to convince you that fighting is useless!”

Rottermund turned with a snarl.

Horrified, Mark saw him raise the gun level with April’s breast. Then the wall went dark as the little scientist cut the connection.

Mark pressed against the wall, listening intently. The voice communication also died when the illumination failed. Quickly Mark jerked off his ring. The diamond was cut and set at the perfect angle to cut glass. It was the only one of the many U.N.C.L.E. protective devices that had survived his capture.

He made a wide circular sweep, dragging the gem across the formerly transparent wall. If he could score it, then it would be just a matter of kicking out the cut and leaping into the other room.

But the material, for all its transparency, was not glass. The diamond slipped across its smooth surface with a screech, but made no score. Desperate now, Mark tried again before he gave up. He had no way of knowing if this was a special glass or some new transparent metal. Whatever it was, it was too hard even for a diamond to cut.

He was still reluctant to acknowledge failure. He backed up, swung the couch around. Heaving it up on one end, he got a good grip and hurled it at the wall. It bounced back, catching him a glancing blow. He picked himself up painfully and stood in the center of the room, breathing hard….

Beyond that impenetrable wall the girl from U.N.C.L.E. was breathing just as hard as she faced the gun in the hands of the determined little man.

April saw his thumb slip a slide on the side of the gun. She knew he was switching to the numbing needle.

"Now!" he said quietly. "Sit down in the chair, Miss Dancer."

April hesitated, her mind racing through several possibilities. She was certain of one thing: She was not going to undergo the ordeal of the interrogation machine again. To her it had become a matter of life and death for U.N.C.L.E.'s Alexander Waverly.

No matter what she said, U.N.C.L.E. would go on. No one agent knew enough of its secrets to permit anybody to destroy the entire organization. But she did realize that she could be forced to reveal certain codes which could lead Mr. Waverly into an ambush. If Rottermund was as determined to destroy the U.N.C.L.E. chief as he claimed to Michaels, the vengeful little scientist could find enough in her mind to pull off his scheme.

This, she was determined, would not happen. Not even if it meant her own life.

"In the chair, Miss Dancer!" Rottermund repeated, his voice growing harder.

April had already given up the thought of trying to jump him. The distance between them was too great. Still there was a temptation. If he was forced to knock her out, the drug serum would interfere with operation of the machine. This would delay the machine third degree for at least another four hours.

But delay gaIIed her. Her entire life and philosophy were built on making a decision and following it through.

In the split second permitted her, she made a decision, a desperate attempt to follow 'Kuryakin's law,' and came out swinging.

"I'm warning you, Miss–" Rottermund began.

April stared at him. Her mouth went slack. Her eyes glazed. She swayed and collapsed. Rottermund stepped back quickly, afraid of a trick, but April huddled on the floor. She tried to push herself up with her hands. Her face, uplifted to him, was twisted in pain. She gasped for breath.

Rottermund looked at her coldly. "I'll not be taken in by any tricks!"

"I-I-can't–" April gasped. The slightest suggestion of worry crossed the little scientist's face. "What is the matter?" he asked uneasily.

"My heart–" April gasped and paused. "I'll be all right, in a minute. The excitement–"

"Do you need something?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," she barely whispered. "I -I have some medicine–"

She weakly removed the package of mints from her pocket.

"W-water!" she whispered, her voice thick. "I–I must have some water–"

His face a convulsing field of mixed emotions, Rottermund backed to a white laboratory sink and filled a beaker from the water tap.

Watching him through half-closed eyes, April could tell that he was afraid. But it was not the panicky fear that Michaels had. It was the cold knowledge that his superiors in THRUSH would be ruthless to any man who lost such a wonderful opportunity to bleed the mind of an U.N.C.L.E. agent.

His manner showed that he was deeply suspicious of her "attack," but at the same time, he could not be sure. He brought her the water and set it on the floor near her. He was still too suspicious to get close enough for her to spring a judo attack on him.

Weakly April shoved the package of mints toward him. The round package rolled almost to the beaker of water.

"Please!" she whispered. "Dissolve it for me. *Hurry*!"

His face gray with anxiety, Rottermund stooped down. He was still taking no chances. He kept the gun trained in April's face. He used his teeth to pull the paper tab from the end of the package.

April stared full into the muzzle of the gun and shuddered. She knew what was going to happen. And when it came, she faced the chilling prospect of the gun going off under the spasmodic jerk of the little scientist's hand.

She shook off the morbid thought. "It will work! It will work!" she kept repeating silently to herself. "Everything is going to be all right. *It will work*!"

April's breathing almost stopped. Her hands clinched. It was from anxiety, but Rottermund thought it pain. The effect added to the realism of her acting.

He shook a mint from the package. April caught her breath. The round disk missed the edge of the glass and rolled across the floor.

He had been so intent on watching April for any sign of movement that he had not watched the glass. April's taut breath was expelled in a sigh of disappointment.

Rottermund made an exclamation of annoyance and shook another mint from the package. April tensed, drawing every muscle taut.

The lifesaver-shaped chemical dropped into the beaker of water. Her fascinated eyes saw it sinking to the bottom. A thin line of tiny bubbles rose as it fell.

Then when the water dissolved through the outer crust, the water exploded in a blinding rush of smoke. It splashed up full in the THRUSH man's face.

April threw herself to one side as the little scientist's finger jerked the gun's trigger. The needle pellet zipped by April's cheek and smashed against the back wall. A tiny drop of a pale green liquid stained the whiteness of the partition.

A blinding cloud of smoke was pouring from the glass. Rottermund had fallen on his back, coughing, strangling.

April crawled toward him. She was careful not to get to her feet. The smoke was rising, partially from its own lightness and partly because it was being pulled by the room ventilator. This left a clear air space near the floor.

Rottermund still clung to the gun with a deathly grip. April tried to jerk it from his fingers. Blinded, strangling as he tried to rid his lungs of the smoke, the little scientist tried to jerk away from her. Catching his elbow with one hand and his wrist with the other, April forced his hand back so the muzzle of the gun rested against his side. She shoved on his hand. His body jerked as the paralyzing pellet ripped into his body. His hand relaxed. She jerked the gun free and moved back quickly.

Rottermund made one last feeble attempt to get up, but the paralyzing effect of the gunfired injection had gone too far. He stretched out and appeared to be asleep.

The smoke was hanging like a storm cloud on the ceiling of the room. It was being pushed closer and closer to the floor despite the pull of the ventilator.

April crawled to the console beside the interrogator chair. She fumbled until she found the button the little German scientist had pushed to talk with Mark Slate.

As before there was no apparent change in the walls of the interrogation room, but Mark could see her crouched on the floor. The heavy smoke hung low in the room. He could barely see Rottermund's stiff body.

"April!" he cried, his voice shaking with relief.

"Mark!" April called back.

"Where are you? Can you see me? I can't see you. And I'm so relieved to have found you again."

"I don't know where I am," he said quickly. "I seem to be in a room adjoining you, but I may be getting the effect from a TV type projection."

"Don't you have *any* idea, Mark?" April Dancer said. "Somebody is going to spot the smoke coming from this ventilator. They'll be in on me any minute. I've only a short time to get you out."

"Don't risk it, April," he said. "I can't find a way out of this place. You can't find a way in. So forget me. Get away if you can."

Then, because Mark understood April so well, he added quickly, "you owe it to U.N.C.L.E., April. None of us is as important as the organization. "

"Mark!" she cried in a stricken voice. "I can't go away and leave you to die here!"

"You know what will happen if you stay and they get you in that infernal interrogation machine. Nothing can prevent you from

revealing secrets that will hurt U.N.C.L.E. Which is the more important? It or me or even you?"

April steeled herself.

"Of course," she said. "I'm sorry, Mark. I wish it were me instead of you. I–"

"Doctor! Doctor? What is the trouble? The worst kind of smoke is pouring out the ventilator! Doctor, what is the matter?"

It was an anxious voice calling through a special speaker set in the outside door.

Mark could see April whirl about. He saw her lift the gun.

He felt a sick upheaval in the pit of his stomach. April could probably shoot down the inquirers since she had the element of surprise on her side. But the commotion would bring out the full force of THRUSH's security guards, an insurmountable force.

April's chances had suddenly become worse than his own and his were impossible!

SEVEN
THE MAN IN THE DARK

The recorder, April!" Mark called anxiously. "They'll call for a minute before they attempt to break the door down. See if you can find something in the dead man's voice that will reassure them!"

April nodded. She shoved the gun in her jacket pocket and grabbed the compact-recorder. The touch of her finger on the hidden key sent its mechanism whirling. She listened intently to the playback, trying to find in the seconds she had something in the renegade German's voice she could rebroadcast over the door speaker.

Outside the voices were becoming more insistent. Fearful that an accident had occurred that might endanger the entire THRUSH headquarters, she could expect them to start tearing down the door at once.

Then April Dancer heard the faint voice of Rottermund saying to the now dead Michaels: "Wait! Give her some rest and everything will be all right!"

Gasping with relief, April turned up the volumes as she ran back the tape a couple of feet. Holding the tiny recorder right against the door speaker, she restarted its forward movement.

The dead man's voice cried: "Wait!"

Before the rest could be replayed, April cut the volume so low it was inaudible over the speaker to those outside. She let the words "Give her some rest–" run past and turned the volume high so those outside could hear "Everything will be all right!"

Then she stopped the replay, listening intently to the voices

outside. She slipped the recorder back in her pocket and pulled out the gun. April Dancer stood waiting tensely, ready to shoot it out with them if she must.

She waited for a breathless moment. Then she heard a voice outside say, “Then back to your guard posts. He must know what he is doing.”

Another said, “Shouldn’t we take a look anyway?”

“No, we have orders never to enter this room under any circumstances unless with Rottermund’s permission. Temperature controls, humidity and a dozen other things can affect that temperamental machine of his.”

Suddenly, now that they were leaving, April decided that she didn’t want them to leave after all. Quickly she reversed the tape to the word “Wait!”

Holding the recorder back against the door speaker, she let the dead man’s voice call: “Wait!”

Then quickly reversing and replaying, she had it repeat, “Wait!”

On the other side of the wall, Mark whispered frantically, “April, you idiot! What are you trying to do?”

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. did not reply. She whirled around and ran to the recorder in the interrogator console which was used to catch the answers of the unfortunate victims of THRUSH.

She switched it on and then started her own compact-recorder. Then she kept backtracking her tape, selecting a word here and there in the dead man’s voice. Each selected word was recorded on the other machine. Swiftly she patched together a complete sentence.

Watching her, Mark Slate sighed. After his first protest, he said nothing. He knew too well that stubborn uplift of her jaw. April Dancer was the world’s most determined young woman when she set her mind to it.

Once April had jigsawed the new sentence together with her two recorders, it was but the work of a couple of seconds to re-tape the few words on her own compact-recorder.

“Okay, Mark,” she said, facing toward the man she could not see but who was watching her with almost rueful admiration. “Here’s where we sink or swim.”

“April, my dear,” he said softly, “you’ll never sink. You don’t know how!”

April tossed a grin in his direction. Something about his presence, even separated as they were, gave her added strength. She had the same feeling she had often experienced before. It was that with Mark Slate as her partner it would be impossible to lose.

It had taken scarcely two minutes to make the voice patch, but April could not be sure that the men had waited. Her lips pressed in a

tight line as she held the micro-recorder by the door speaker and tripped its forward advance.

The dead scientist's voice said, "Bring Mark Slate. I am ready for him."

"Okay, doctor," one of the guards replied.

April let her breath out in a relieved sigh. She dropped the recorder in her pocket and shifted the three-way THRUSH gun to her right hand. She moved back where she could cover the door with the weapon and waited.

A minute passed. Two. And then three. It seemed an hour, but her anxiety for Mark Slate kept her from attempting to leave.

Then through the speaker to his cell she heard the guards order Mark to come with them.

"Fasten his hands," the second guard suggested. "You know what happened the last time we tried to move this bully boy."

"Yeah!" the other said gloomily.

"I can't understand how anybody who looks so much like a rock-and-roll jerk can fight like a prize fighter!"

"Really, gentlemen," Mark said with a touch of irony in his voice. "It is in the hair. Never get a haircut, you know. The Samson idea, of course!"

"Put out your hands," the guard said grimly. We'll see how tough you are with the cuffs on."

Then she heard a *swat*! It was the unmistakable sound of bone hitting flesh. Her heart leaped, but her reaction was fury rather than fear.

"If that crazy man has started a fight and ruins everything, I'll snatch his un-barbered hair out by the roots!" she muttered grimly to herself.

The next sound showed her it was not Mark Slate who started the trouble. She heard one of the men laugh.

"No hard feelings," he said with a sneer in his voice. "Just a partial payment on that lick you gave me when you tried to escape before!"

His companion said hurriedly, "The doc wants to question him in that machine. If you beat him too badly now, it may interfere with the questioning. "

"Yeah," the other man replied.

"I guess you're right. We'll be bringing him back though. I'll take care of him then!"

"He'll be unconscious," his companion said. "You know how that infernal machine leaves its victims."

The other guard snickered. "So he'll be unconscious. He'll wake up eventually, won't he? Then he can *feel* what I'll give him!"

Evidently the door to Mark's cell was closed by them for the sound

of their voices were cut off. April grimly faced the door and waited. Her only regret was that she did not know which one of the two made the threats to Mark. If she had to kill she wanted that brutal man to be the first.

The minutes ticked away. When they went to the cell the wait had seemed an hour. This one seemed longer.

The minutes continued to tick away. April shifted her position to eliminate strain and wondered if they would ever come.

As if in answer to her question, the door speaker crackled into life.

"Doctor?" the guard's voice said.

"We have the prisoner Mark Slate."

There was a remote control switch on the interrogator console which opened the door. April had seen the dead scientist use it. However, she could not decide which button to press. None were marked. April ran quickly across the room to the door to open it by hand. This complicated her problems. It was impossible for her to open the heavy, soundproofed door by hand without exposing herself.

She had no choice, however. Once again it was not for herself that she feared, but for Mark Slate. April Dancer expected to have to shoot quickly once she swung back the heavy door, but she had no way of knowing just how they held Mark. There was a distinct danger that a poorly aimed shot would slam into him.

Her eyes flashed with a stubborn determination. She had made a decision. It was too late to have doubts now. There was nothing left but to follow 'Kuryakin's law.' She was ready to come out swinging.

But the door was heavy and difficult to manage. It opened easily with the electrical switch, but was hard to handle by hand. April had to ram the gun in her jacket pocket and pull with both hands. She realized this would put her in a difficult position. Experience had long since taught her that THRUSH did not employ the "dumb cop" type for guards. They were men who could think rapidly and move fast.

The odds were two-to-one against her. And there was the possible problem of Mark Slate being in the way. She took a deep breath and grabbed the door handle with both hands. She jerked back with all her strength.

The door moved. She caught just the glimpse of the two guards and their prisoner through the crack. She dropped the handle and grabbed the gun. She jerked it up and fired. The needle-thin serum pellet struck the belt buckle of the nearest guard and shattered harmlessly.

April fired again, raising the gun barrel. There was no answering reaction. She had fired the last pellet!

April dropped to the floor, frantically thumbing the catch on the side which switched the cartridge cylinder from pellets to bullets.

The guard already had his gun out. His hand jerked down, leveling the barrel directly at April's head. Behind him his companion hastily stepped to the side to get in line for a shot at her himself.

But before either could fire, Mark hunched his shoulders and rammed into the second man. The guard lurched forward, striking his companion just as the gun in his hand exploded.

The bullet intended for April smashed into the floor inches from her head and ricocheted off the hard tile with a whine of death.

The guard whirled around as April's bullet caught him in the chest. He hurtled back, upsetting the other guard. Before the second man could recover, Mark caught the man's fist with a savage kick. The gun flew from the THRUSH man's hand and skidded across the hall.

The guard whirled and dived for the gun. April raised her own weapon to fire, but held it, for Mark was in the way. Slate leaped for the guard. The man whirled, kicking viciously at Mark's legs. The U.N.C.L.E. agent skirted the kick and brought his manacled hands down with a hard chop on the guard's head. The man sagged.

"Quick, Mark!" April cried. "We've got to get out of here!"

"Excellent idea!" the Englishman said with a wry grin at the girl. "Where's the nearest exit?"

"Stop making jokes!" she snapped. "How do I know?"

"If we don't do something quickly, the noise of those shots will have every guard and THRUSH man in this place playing tag with us."

Mark Slate was on his knees, fumbling for the key to his manacles. April darted across the corridor and grabbed the guard's gun. She turned as Mark fished out the key. She opened the lock for him. He snapped the bracelets on the unconscious guard.

Then, to April's surprise, he grabbed the unconscious man's arm and swung him around in a fireman's carry.

Despite the gravity of their situation, April could not resist saying, "Collecting souvenirs, Mark?"

"I prefer to call it life insurance!" he returned. "Come on, April. The life we save may be our own!"

Mark Slate started down the corridor in a run that was surprisingly fast for the burden he carried. April followed. She wasn't sure Mark knew what he was doing, but she was certain that he knew at least as much as she did about getting out–and what she knew was absolutely nothing.

As they went around a corner, April heard the whine of an elevator's doors opening. She looked back, raising the gun. She didn't have to use it. The men running out of the lift were attracted by the dead man in front of the laboratory door. They did not come in the direction of the fugitives.

She followed behind Slate. Her co-agent ran with a purpose, as if

he knew exactly what he was doing.

And surprisingly, he did. He turned down a short hall and stopped, puffing in front of a closed door.

“Push it open,” he said to April. “It isn’t locked.”

As April stepped past him to obey, he said, “And please, whatever you do, don’t speak a word. They’ll be able to hear you.”

April nodded, not understanding, but having complete faith in her co-agent. She pushed open the door. Mark entered first with his burden. April followed.

The room was flooded with light.

It was so bright after the dark hall that April Dancer was momentarily blinded. She shut her eyes for a moment to permit the irises to adjust.

Then when she opened them, she gasped. She found herself looking straight into the face of a man from THRUSH! Behind him were three others.

Every one of them was staring straight at her stricken face. She took a startled step back and bumped into Mark. To her further bewilderment, her co-agent laughed quietly.

EIGHT

THE LONG WAY HOME

Suddenly she felt like laughing with him, but she stifled the impulse for fear the three men staring at her might hear.

In the first burst of surprise at seeing the men staring at her, plus the distorted vision caused by the brightly reflecting lights from the white laboratory, April had not immediately recognized where she was.

Mark had brought her and their prisoner back to the cell where he had been imprisoned. The brilliant projection on the wall was the interior view of the interrogation room. The switch had been left on. It was like the communication between her and Mark. They could see from the cell, but the wall was blank in the laboratory. She suspected that the arrangement was set up in this manner in order to act as a war of nerves on prisoners before they were taken to the machine. They could see its effect on previous prisoners and their own resistance would be corroded.

Behind her Mark was stuffing his handkerchief into the prisoner's mouth to prevent him from warning the others.

Then silently the two agents from U.N.C.L.E. watched the worried guards search the laboratory and then rush out.

"I think we're safe enough here," Mark said. "I don't think they'll suspect we were crazy enough to run back into a prison."

"You may be willing to set up housekeeping and spend the rest of your days in this cell, but I'm not!" April snapped. "Let's start figuring a way to get out of here—fast!"

Mark smiled at her. Although always exasperated at the casual way he treated the most extreme danger, she, as always, took comfort from it. It was totally impossible to get that all-is-lost feeling around a man like Mark Slate. What he felt like inside, only he knew, but outwardly he always gave the impression that every difficulty would topple with the right kind of push.

He motioned to the guard. The THRUSH man had regained consciousness. He was sprawled back on the couch with his manacled hands behind him.

"This gentleman knows the way out of here," he said. "I am sure he will provide us the information for a consideration. A consideration–say–of being left in a condition of being able to keep on breathing. "

He held out his hand. Wordlessly April passed him the extra THRUSH gun. He reached over and pulled the gag from the prisoner's mouth.

"You have it on paralysis," April said. "If you want to kill him, shove the slide to the last adjustment."

"Excellent!" Mark said lightly in a tone that did not match the cold stare of his eyes. "That is just exactly what I want to do."

"You–" the prisoner began defiantly.

"Please!" Mark silenced him by sticking the gun muzzle within inches of the man's sweating face. "I know what you are going to say. Why should you show us the way out to save your life when THRUSH will kill you if you do?"

He shoved the barrel of the gun deeper against the sweating THRUSH man's belly.

"I'll tell you the answer to that," Mark went on. "If you don't show us the way out, you die right now. That's the end of it and of you. But if you act sensible about this thing, you will at least last a little longer. And in that time, who knows? Anything can happen. You might even figure a lie big enough for your THRUSH superiors to swallow."

The guard looked back at Mark with stubborn hate in his eyes, but he swallowed hard. He knew the quality of the men from U.N.C.L.E.

"As long as you are alive there is always hope," Mark said. You are as close to dying right now as a man can be and still breathe!"

The guard's Adam's apple bobbed again. He was sweating profusely. He looked from Mark Slate to April Dancer. He got no sympathy there. He shivered and nodded his head.

Mark reached down and pulled the gag from the man's mouth.

"Where are we?" he asked. "Is this THRUSH headquarters?"

"No," the man mouthed the word thickly through jaws that still ached from the gag.

"What is this place?"

"It is an industrial research laboratory attached to the KaTab Company. THRUSH gained control of the company to get the services of the laboratory staff."

"Where are we physically?" Mark asked.

"In the basement of the KaTab building."

"Then we are right in the center of Manhattan," Mark said. "The KaTab is a highly respected manufacturer of electronic gear for the U.S. Armed Services."

April made a grimace. "Yes, and they make the printed circuit for the tape recorders built in my compact and in your cigarette lighter. It will be a joke on THRUSH if we escape because of something its people made!"

"Not if we escape," Mark said reprovingly. "*When* we escape!"

"Sorry," April said with a grin.

"When we escape. And may I ask when do we stop talking and do something about making that *when* a *now*?"

"A typical Yank," Mark smiled. "Always in a hurry."

"How many floors down are we?" April asked the guard. "Answer quickly!"

"Three," he said. "But there is no outlet on the elevator between here and the fifty-second floor. It goes straight up as a precaution against unauthorized entry and to keep the scientific staff from leaving unannounced."

"Where does the elevator open into on the fifty-second floor?" April asked.

"Into the guard room," their prisoner replied.

Mark looked at April.

"Now isn't that a bitter cup of tea," he said. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"How about Kuryakin's law?" she said, her dark eyes flashing with the excitement extreme danger always stirred in her. "When all else fails, come out swinging!"

He grinned at her. "What better routine for a couple of swingers?" he said.

"Okay!" April said briskly. "Do we take him or leave him?"

"I think we had best take him," Mark replied. "That way, if he has told us the truth, we can properly express our appreciation."

"And if he hasn't?" April asked. "I also have a very fine technique for expressing my disapproval," Mark said. The lightness of his tone was belied by the cold stare he gave the uncomfortable guard.

The man shifted uneasily. He wet his lips nervously.

"Get up," Mark said.

April looked at him sharply, but Slate gave no indication that he noticed the prisoner's uncomfortable manner.

"Come along," Mark said to the man. "You will of course step out of the elevator first. If we run into a trap you will get it first!"

"I–uh–" the prisoner began and stopped.

"Yes?' 'Mark said coldly.

"I sort of got mixed up," the prisoner said hurriedly.

"And did you, now?" Mark said softly.

"I forgot, I guess, that there are two stops on the laboratory elevator. One is the guard room I mentioned. The second goes another floor up. There it empties out into the personnel office. It is empty this time of night."

"Very interesting," Mark said.

"But we'll stop at the guard room."

The guard's mouth dropped open. "There are always five men in

there," he said.

"That," Mark said in a curiously flat voice, "is their misfortune!"

He motioned for April to see if the corridor was clear. When she looked back and nodded, Mark prodded the reluctant guard in the back with the gun.

"Get moving," he said. "We're going home –the long way."

They moved out into the hall. April went ahead to scout the way. The prisoner came along behind her with Mark at his heels. Slate kept the THRUSH gun trained on the man's back.

They made the short distance to the elevator without trouble, and a second later were winging their way up the tall office building. They flashed past floor after floor, where late shift workers made electronic assemblies, completely unaware that the world's most sinister organization had gathered their company into its net.

As the elevator started slowing, Mark looked across at April. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. nodded to show that she was ready.

"I think we'd better throw these guns over to that THRUSH-type tranquilizer pellets," she said. "There won't be any explosions to attract attention."

"I agree," Mark said. "Have you enough ammunition?"

"Yes," she said. "I dropped the gun I had and took the one from the dead guard. You have the prisoner's weapon."

"Good!" Mark said. "Suppose we modify Kuryakin's law to bring it up to date and 'come out *shooting*!' "

"I'm with you," April said. And then there was no more time to talk. The door slid open silently. Mark gave the guard a shove. He stumbled out into the room. A guard supervisor looked up from behind a desk place in front of a case of guns. To his right a clerk was typing a report. To the left was a status board showing the placement of guards throughout the entire building.

"What the–?" the guard chief began and stopped with his mouth open as a well placed pellet from Mark's gun went into his throat.

The clerk fell across his typewriter as April's pellet zipped into his cheek.

There was a commotion in the opposite side of the room. Three men who were waiting to go on shift sprang up, drawing their guns.

The prisoner Mark shoved out to create a distraction squalled loudly, "They've escaped. It's that infernal pair from U.N.C.L.E.!"

Mark's gun snapped off a pellet.

The yelling man spun around and toppled back into the elevator. Mark threw an arm about the rapidly numbing man and pulled the prisoner tight against him. With this feebly kicking shield he stepped into the open. He raised his gun for a quick shot.

But before he could shoot a .45 caliber slug from one of the guards

smashed into the prisoner's chest. The force of the bullet striking spoiled Mark's aim. His pellet went high.

April Dancer was flat on the elevator floor. Her head peered around the side of the door. The three men were intent on the tall figure of Mark. They did not notice April until the man in the middle of the three pitched forward.

The other two whirled to face the new danger. That was a fatal mistake. Mark's gun ripped into one. April caught the other full in the face.

Mark let the dead guard drop. April darted across the room. She put her head against the door leading into the hall, listening. When she heard nothing, she peeked outside cautiously.

She turned back to Slate. "I don't hear anyone coming. There wasn't a lot of noise. Maybe we got away with it."

"I thought we could," he replied. "If we had gone on to the top we would still have had to come back this way to get on the elevator to the lobby. I thought it best to hit straight for the heart of the mess."

April nodded her agreement.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"You recall that Hong Kong affair?"

"Of course!" she said. In spite of the gravity of their situation she managed a grin. "I distinctly recall that Chinese beauty who slapped your face just when you thought you were–"

"Please!" he said stiffly. "I was referring to the incident where we were caught in that fake exporter's office on Victoria Island. I believe it was your idea. That was when I first decided you were a good person to have around. In a fight, I mean."

"You aren't so bad yourself," she retorted. "In a fight, I mean."

He grinned at her. "Then let's disband our mutual admiration society and do a little fighting. What?"

Working rapidly, they pushed the desk and two filing cabinets against the door. The elevator switch was turned to emergency stop so a press of the button in the basement would not take it away at the crucial moment.

While April overturned the couch, Mark stripped off his jacket. After removing the stunned guard's uniform coat, he put his garments on the THRUSH man. Then, pulling him into the elevator, he used the guard's belt to lash him to the inside handrail in an upright position.

April helped support the man while Mark worked.

The unconscious man sagged too much. Mark took off his own belt, but was still unable to get the body to stay in a completely upright position.

April stepped back into the room to survey the effect. Mark looked questioningly at her.

She nodded. “It will work. He looks like he’s wounded and having difficulty standing up.”

“Great,” Mark said. “Are you ready, April?”

She nodded. They hurried over and slipped the catch lock on the hall door. April pulled the door open a few inches. Then she let out a piercing scream that echoed off the silent corridors like a soul in mortal torment. Mark began to shout in a thick, hoarse voice.

“She’s getting away!” he bawled. “Shoot! Shoot, you fool! They’re both from U.N.C.L.E.!”

From the opposite end of the corridor the floor guard shouted and a hidden bell started a wild alarm clamor. April whirled and dived back of the overturned couch. Mark slipped into the guard’s jacket. He took a position at the elevator entrance with his hand inside on the down button.

Outside, in the corridor, guards were beating on the door. Mark watched intently as they pushed back the heavy furniture barricade. Just as the crack widened, he pushed the elevator button.

As the door swung open to the hall, he dropped to the floor, face down. He hoped that in the excitement the in-rushing guards would not notice that his trousers were tweed instead of the uniform blue serge of the other guards.

The elevator door was just moving shut as they broke in. Mark’s timing had been perfect. They glimpsed a sagging body of a man in a sports jacket and loud waistcoat through the rapidly closing crack. Then the elevator started to descend.

“Can’t you stop the thing?” one of the men cried. “If they get away, it’ll be our necks!”

“This is the express!” the hall guard said hurriedly. “It cannot stop anywhere except in the basement laboratory. They can’t get away. I sounded the emergency alert. They’ll be trapped below.”

“Come on!” one of the others said. “We’ll take the service elevator down. Tim, you stay here and see if you can help any of the wounded. You other three come with me.”

They went out the door, leaving it open. April Dancer turned behind her barricade and brought her THRUSH gun to bear on the man left behind. He walked toward Mark, who was still lying on the floor by the closed elevator shaft, pretending to be unconscious.

She slowly squeezed off the trigger. The gun snapped, but a broken serum pellet jammed in the cylinder. The noise of the hammer falling, slight as it was, caused the guard to whirl around.

He jerked up his gun as April hastily thumbed the gun from pellets to bullets.

Since the man had to draw his holstered gun and she had but to flip a switch with her thumb, April could easily have beaten him to

the shot. But she hesitated, not daring to fire for fear of bringing the other guards back. The bullet cylinder made a loud report while the pellets moved quietly with a hissing fire.

April had seen Mark move and was gambling her life that he could bring down the guard before the THRUSH man could shoot her.

Nine
"WHERE'S APRIL"

Mark lurched to his knees and hit the THRUSH man with a football dive just as the guard pulled the trigger of his gun. The bullet intended for April smashed into the wall behind her head.

Unable to shoot for fear of hitting her co-agent, she darted forward to help. But as she moved in, Slate landed a hard right that slammed the guard back into April. Both he and the girl fell.

The guard, deciding Mark was the greatest danger, snaked his body around to aim pointblank at the Englishman's chest.

April caught him with the sharp heel of her shoe. He doubled up and Mark moved in fast to finish him off.

"Come on!" April said breathlessly. "They will have heard the shot!"

She was off, racing down the hall with Mark in fast pursuit. They found an elevator marked *street level*, but as the door closed behind them, April saw two men running toward them.

"They'll call the lower level guards to head us off," she said to Mark. She was breathing hard from the run.

Mark grinned at her. "That will be their misfortune," he said.

April laughed. The old sparkle of excitement made her face glow. "That's just exactly the way I feel," she said.

"They'll probably have fifty guards at the bottom to head us off," he said.

"Just take care of your twenty-five and I'll handle the others," April said in a positive-sounding voice.

"Let's not kid ourselves, April. This is the toughest spot we've ever been in. We can't let this elevator stop and them trap us in here. We can get some of them before they get us, but that isn't much consolation. "

He spoke of their possible death as calmly as another woman might speak of a shopping trip.

"Well, if you have a better idea, I'll be delighted to follow it–no matter how crazy," she said. "It will certainly be better than what we probably face."

"There is no way to reverse the elevator and go back up," she said thoughtfully. "We can stop it, though."

"It won't help one bit to get off at any floor above the bottom. We'd be trapped."

"Let them *think* we got off at the second floor," he suggested.

"Punch the button," April said. "It's worth a try."

The revolving gauge already showed they had dropped to the fourth floor when April punched the number two button on the automatic controls. A couple of seconds later the elevator stopped and the door swung open. The couple from U.N.C.L.E. pressed back against the wall, their guns ready to fight if THRUSH agents tried to rush them.

The floor was empty, however. April looked up at her companion.

"So far so good," she said. "If the stop fooled them into thinking we got off, then there is just the barest chance we might get out of this mess alive after all."

"If you're thinking of making book on it, save your money," he said lightly. "But let's not worry about it. Just hope there is something to this reincarnation jazz."

"You'll surely come back as a clown," she said. "*Oh*! What is the matter?"

"I don't know!" Mark said. His grin had vanished.

The elevator, after starting again from the stop, passed the second floor and then ground to a stop between the first and the ground floor. The light inside the cage went out.

"They've cut the power!" Mark Slate said. "We're trapped, April!"

"Not yet!" she snapped. "This is a standard Handley-Page elevator. There's an escape door in the top. Can you boost me up, Mark?"

"Sure thing, old thing," he said brightly.

"Stop that!" April Dancer snapped. "I've noticed that the worse the fix we're in, the gayer you become. You're demoralizing me! Now start groaning and complaining and I'll know things are going to be all right!"

"Let's quarrel when we retire to our rocking chairs. Here, I'm making a saddle with my hands. Can you feel it?"

It was pitch black in the elevator cage.

"Yes!" April said as her hands touched his. She placed one shoe in Slate's cupped hands and he lifted her. She stepped gingerly to his shoulders, swaying slightly, but his strong grip on her legs prevented her from falling.

She got her hands fiat against the small escape door and pushed it open. A faint light illuminated the cage.

"Can you pull yourself through?" Mark asked.

"Look out, Mark! Duck!" April's cry was punctuated by a blast of gunfire.

She jumped from Mark's shoulders, missed her footing and rolled

against the wall.

Slate leaped to one side to escape presenting a target through the escape hatch.

"They've opened the shaft door on the floor above," April said shakily. There's no chance of getting through the escape door and climbing the cables now."

"Well, think of something else," Mark said. "This is your day to be the knight in armor while I take the part of the damsel in distress."

"I wish you would take this seriously!" April Dancer said soundly.

"And I, my dear, wish I didn't have to take it so seriously," he said sadly. "They'll crank down the elevator to the ground floor with the manual controls. They'll have us covered from above and from outside."

"I–" she began and what she was going to say was drowned in a burst of gunfire from above.

April pressed back against the wall, drawing her legs up to make herself as small as possible. The danger was not from a direct hit. The hole through which the enemy was firing was too small for his aim to cover the edges of the elevator cage. Their greatest worry was from a bullet glancing off the hard tile floor.

But there was no whine of slugs. Round pellets, somewhat larger than buckshot, hit in the center of the cage. They smashed against the tile. A peculiar purple vapor rose out of the shattered plastic coating.

"Get your face right against the floor, April!" Mark called urgently. "Get your lungs as full of fresh air as you can. Don't inhale again until you absolutely must! The open hatch above will take some of the stuff out. We have a chance if the air doesn't get too thick and we can keep from breathing any more of the gas than we must!"

"What is it?" April asked.

"I don't know," Slate replied. "It's a new one to me."

April put her cheek against the floor. She could see the sinister-looking purple mist spreading. It had a slight iridescent glow that made its unpleasant progress visible even in the dark. She kept breathing as deeply as she could while the air at the floor level was clean.

The mist was rising, as Mark Slate predicted. It was very thick at the top of the cage as the natural draft pulled it upward. But in the inches above the floor it was only beginning to cast a faint touch to the air.

April could feel a slight tingling to her skin. She pulled one final burst of air into her lungs and held her breath. Just a tinge of the peculiar purple air tainted the air. She could feel it prickle the mucous membrane in her nose. With the feeling came a slight feeling of nausea, a touch of giddiness.

Then as if the sound came from very far away, April heard the elevator door start to open. She tried to focus her mind on what was happening, but the slight whiff of the purple gas was sufficient to upset her mental faculties without actually rendering her unconscious.

Dimly she was conscious of Mark whispering across to her: "They will have to keep back to avoid exposure to the gas themselves. Keep still. Let them think we have been overcome. The gas will flow out of the open door. Then when they come in after us, we'll have the element of surprise on our side when we jump them."

She wanted to acknowledge that she understood, but she was sinking deeper into a giddy lassitude. She tried to raise the THRUSH gun and in her condition it felt unnaturally heavy.

At the same time her lungs started to burn. The lack of oxygen from her held breath added to her dizziness. The cage started to spin. She was only vaguely conscious of Mark leaping to his feet. The crash of gunfire as he blasted at the enemy outside sounded to her like the roll of thunder far off in the distance.

Mark realized that the swirl of the air current in the cage had driven a stiffer cloud of the purple gas to April's side of the cage. There was nothing he could do to aid her at the moment. His primary aim was to attack before the enemy knew he was still conscious. He also hoped that the sound of gunfire here in the street-level lobby would bring police attention. At the same time, air flowing out the open door of the elevator would prevent April from getting a larger dose of the enervating gas.

He came out shooting, crouched low almost against the floor. He saw one THRUSH man across the corridor. He fired, striking the man in the stomach. He turned, looking for another target, but the effect of the gas was beginning to tell on him. His vision blurred. Mark Slate shook his head, making a desperate attempt to keep his senses. He snaked his body forward. A bullet crashed into the elevator frame just over his head.

Mark ducked and shot back blindly in the direction of the shot. Then he turned as quickly as his rapidly deteriorating senses would permit and aimed at the looming hulk of a big man to the right of him.

But before he could shoot, the man let out a choked cry and plunged forward. For a moment Mark Slate stared stupidly at the fallen body. Then he realized to his astonishment that a man was crouched beside one of the marble lobby pillars, firing into the THRUSH group. Mark Slate forced his sagging arms to lift the now cannon-heavy gun. His last two shots accounted for a man each.

He was dimly conscious that their rescuer was running toward him. He couldn't see distinctly anymore, but the man's general body

outline reminded him of Napoleon Solo, one of the most outstanding of the agents from U.N.C.L.E.

The first reaction in his disturbed mind was surprise that Napoleon Solo could have gotten here from Europe so fast.

Mark tried to get up, but his feet slipped in the blood that streaked the lobby floor.

He was dimly conscious of the man bending over him. As if from miles away he heard: “Where is she? Quick! Where is the girl?”

“In the–the–elevator,” he managed to gasp out.

Then his head fell forward. That was all he knew until he regained consciousness in a corner of the lobby where the police had laid him with two wounded THRUSH men pending arrival of the police ambulance.

Mark Slate tried to sit up, but a uniformed policeman warned him not to move. He let his head drop–not because he was ordered to, but because he couldn’t hold it up.

Mark lay there for perhaps three minutes before he regained sufficient control of his senses to recall the nightmare in the elevator cage. He struggled into a sitting position.

“I told you–” the angry policeman began, waving his service revolver in Mark’s face.

Mark swallowed hard. The room still wasn’t distinct to his unfocused eyes. Mark swallowed again, having difficulty getting words out of his tight, dry throat. Finally he managed to get out three words that produced a I80 degree turn in the policeman’s manner. It was a secret code distributed to all metropolitan police to permit identification of U.N.C.L.E. agents when they were caught in a position where the usual identification was not available.

The policeman stooped and helped Mark lean against the wall so he could sit up without so much effort. Then he called the sergeant in charge of the squad which was trying to seal off the entire building. He knelt down beside Mark Slate.

“What’s all this about?” he asked.

“THRUSH!” Mark said unsteadily. “I’ll give you a report later. Where is the girl? Where is April Dancer?”

“Girl?” the sergeant said blankly. “There was no girl.”

“In the elevator,” Mark said, a touch of fear for April gripping him. “She was unconscious on the floor.”

“There was no girl in the elevator when we got here,” the policeman said positively.

“Then where–” Mark began. “If THRUSH got her back in the building–”

“Just a minute,” the sergeant said. “We have some witnesses off the street. I’ll ask if any of them saw a girl. I’ll be right back.”

Mark got up gingerly. His legs were still shaky, but he found he could stand. While the policeman was making his inquiries, Mark walked unsteadily across the lobby to a phone booth.

He dialed a number that would connect him to a blind where his message would be relayed into U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

"I have a message for Mr. Watson," he said, using the code for Waverly when they had to communicate over regular lines where there was some possibility of wiretaps.

"One moment please," a girl's voice replied. "Mr. Watson will speak to you direct."

Mark was surprised. Then he heard Waverly's voice, "I have been waiting to hear from you. We received the news report of a gun battle downtown and I assumed that you might be involved. I kept Mr. Kovac late tonight in case of an emergency. He has already been dispatched. You may report to me more fully after he arrives with the proper equipment."

"Yes, sir," Mark said and hung up.

When he came out of the booth, the police sergeant returned.

"You were right, Mr. Slate," he said. "There was a girl."

"Where is she?" Mark asked, still breathing heavily.

"She was apparently unconscious. Some man was carrying her. He put her in a car and drove away."

Mark breathed a little easier. "Shall I put out an all-points bulletin asking for a pickup on the car?" the policeman asked.

"Not yet," Mark said. "She could have been taken to the hospital by one of our men. Someone helped us. I couldn't get a good look at his face, but his help definitely showed he was not a THRUSH agent."

"Well, if you need anything just yell. I got to get busy."

"Thanks, officer. You've been a tremendous help."

His legs were so shaky that Mark went over and sat down until Randy Kovac arrived, breathless from his headlong chase from U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

"What happened, Mr. Slate?" the boy asked eagerly. "I'm so glad to see you."

"We had to parry a thrust from THRUSH, Randy," Mark said. "Did you bring me a pen-communicator?"

"Yes, sir. Here it is. What about Miss Dancer?"

"She's all right, Randy," he said.

Then after extending the antenna he said into the communicator, "Slate calling Mr. Waverly."

"Waverly here. Go ahead Mr. Slate. Is Miss Dancer with you?"

"No, somebody–I think Napoleon Solo–took her to a hospital."

There was a heartbeat silence and then Mr. Waverly said, "Mr. Solo is in Europe, Mr. Slate."

"Then who took April? Who was it who helped us?"

"It was no one from U.N.C.L.E.," Waverly said positively. "You had best tell me what the situation is, Mr. Slate."

"I wish I knew!" Mark said, fear for April gripping him.

TEN
"FIND APRIL DANCER"

As quickly as he could, Mark Slate sketched for his chief what had happened to them in the THRUSH-controlled building.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just didn't have enough on the ball to stop them."

"On the contrary, Mr. Slate," Waverly said, "you did a most remarkable job. I wish you would come here to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters for a special conference. I will have our entire resources thrown into this problem. What you have told me about this trigger bomb has convinced me that the world is facing what is perhaps the gravest crisis in its history. We must act fast."

"Yes, sir," Mark Slate said. "I'll come right now."

He closed the antenna and slipped the pen-communicator into his pocket. He stood thinking, a worried look creasing his face.

"I wonder–" he said, almost to himself.

"Yes, sir?" Randy asked eagerly.

"I was just thinking aloud, Randy," Mark said slowly. "I was thinking about April."

In the excitement young Kovac had forgotten that April was missing. He sobered.

"I want to do something to help," he said earnestly. "I–I want to do something myself to help her."

"You know how Mr. Waverly is," Mark replied. "He's a stickler for discipline. But this is something of an unusual situation. There's quite a crowd out here watching the police mop up. Circulate around and see if you can find anyone who got a good look at the man who carried April into the car. We need a good description to send out on the police bulletin."

"I'll get it!" the boy said.

"Okay then. Go at it," Mark said.

As for himself, he caught a taxi which deposited him on the little street about two blocks from the Del Floria's Tailor Shop. After paying off the cab, Mark Slate paused to light a cigarette, which gave him an opportunity to search for any sign of a tail.

Satisfied that he had not been followed, Mark walked down to the shop. There was a closed sign in the door, but beyond the glass he could see a little man in a tailor's apron still puttering around inside.

Mark rapped on the pane. The little tailor let him in and after a friendly nod padded back into the shop. As Mark entered one of the dressing cubicles in the back, Signor Del Floria touched a hidden button on the pressing machine. In exactly forty-nine seconds, Mark entered Alexander Waverly's private office high in the modem building housing the New York headquarters of U.N.C.L.E.

Waverly was listening to a report coming over the recessed speaker set in the communications console on his desk. He nodded to Mark and waved his agent into a chair opposite him.

The U.N.C.L.E. chief finished his call and leaned back in his chair. He thoughtfully surveyed the lean, muscular ex-RAF pilot, ex-Cambridge student, and ex-member of the British Olympic team.

"I trust you are all right, Mr. Slate?" he said.

"Yes, sir. I did lose my jacket and waistcoat, Mark said quietly. "I suppose, sir, I can put them on my expense account?" he added hopefully.

"I wish you would take a tip from Miss Dancer about filing those things," Waverly said. "Even on jobs where you are together, her expenses are much less than yours."

"Well," Mark said lamely, "she's smaller than I. She doesn't eat as much."

"The real problem now," Mr. Waverly said, leaning back and picking up one of his pipes from the desk, "is where is she eating right now."

"I don't know," Mark said.

"When I first came here from the London office and was assigned to work with April, I confess that I often worried about her and the scrapes she got herself into. Now I am almost inclined to worry about her adversary instead of her."

Waverly rubbed his pipe bowl thoughtfully. "There is more than a little truth in your statement. Miss Dancer is certainly a most capable and resourceful young woman."

"Yes, sir," Mark replied. "You know, there were a couple of times tonight when we were in a rather more than tight spot. Yet when I would look around at her, I'd see that she just thrives on that sort of thing. She actually enjoys danger. It is hard to feel that all is lost when you are with someone who is so obviously getting such a kick out of things."

"That is true," the U.N.C.L.E. Chief said. "Miss Dancer wins because she is utterly incapable of thinking she could lose. Nevertheless, all of us reach the limit of our capacities. While the computers have not given us a definite probability, I cannot but feel that Miss Dancer has been taken by Franklyn Royce."

"It is possible, sir."

"But we have no definite evidence at all. Computers must have human supplied data on which to work. We don't have and consequently these mechanical wonders are useless."

"I'm willing to stake my life on your hunches, sir," Mark said. "I haven't seen one of them yet that wasn't right."

"Well, I have," Mr. Waverly said gloomily. "I think my lifetime average must be about fifty per cent right and the same number wrong."

"That isn't bad."

"It is when I must consider that April Dancer's life may depend on the decision I must make on a basis of such incomplete information."

"You forget that we won't be doing it all. There's April on the other end, and you admitted yourself that she–"

"I know what I admitted," something of an edge coming into Waverly's usually matter-of-fact voice. "But there is something else here, Mr. Slate. April Dancer is so successful in getting out of tight spots because she has an uncanny and perhaps instinctive ability to judge exactly what her opponents will do."

"Yes, sir, I've noticed that myself," Mark said.

"But we are not dealing with a normal logical person in Franklyn Royce," Mr. Waverly said.

The U.N.C.L.E. chief picked up a small punched card from the desk. He slipped it into the slot of a reader hidden in the recesses under the desk top. The hidden speaker started to talk:

Franklyn Royce-Criminal record*: Defected from USA to USSR to THRUSH. Three times arrested for assault. Four arrests for writing threatening letters to fancied enemies. Is not a criminal in the normal sense of the word. Is activated by grievances, fancied and real. Personality: Highly unstable.*

Twice faced lunacy court after berserk attacks on colleagues, but judged legally sane each time. Broods constantly on failure of world to appreciate his undoubted genius. Has hair-trigger resentment against society which flares on the slightest provocation. This resentment, rooted in childhood and early youth resentments and frustrations, has increased markedly in recent years. Must be considered an extremely erratic personality. He–

"That is sufficient to give you an idea of the type of man we are involved with," Waverly said, shutting off the card reader. "It is impossible to predict what such a man will do. If April Dancer is in his hands, she is facing the gravest danger of her life."

"Yes, sir," Mark said soberly. He swallowed hard.

Mr. Waverly leaned back in his chair. He often wondered what his two brilliant agents thought of each other personally. April herself had always been too involved with her U.N.C.L.E. career to give much

attention to men. And Mark Slate's outward attitude toward his pretty partner had always been big brotherish.

But these were surface indications, however. He often suspected that under that surface each had a higher regard for the other than just professional respect. He also suspected that neither of them was conscious of just how much they did think of each other.

Right or wrong as the assumption might be, Waverly could see that, for all his easy outward manner, Mark Slate kept betraying his concern for April's predicament in many little ways.

Waverly kept the impatient young man tied to his chair while reports kept filtering in. The car in which April was carried away proved to be a rented vehicle and had been left at the company's drop at the airport. The description gained by U.N.C.L.E. investigators tallied with that of Franklyn Royce. The report claimed Royce had a young woman with him and that she behaved as if either drugged or sodden drunk.

"Then that cinches it," Mark said. "Royce does have her. It is logical enough. He knew the inner workings of the THRUSH laboratory from his own service there. And he had to get April in an attempt to regain the weapon. He followed her here from Los Angeles."

"It would seem so, Mr. Slate," Waverly said.

"Then I should see what I can do about finding Royce."

"Sit down, Mr. Slate. Royce drove this car with April to the airport. There are no planes leaving at this hour that he could have boarded. Our people have checked each passenger list. They also checked on any private planes taking off. There has been none."

"I see. That would indicate he is still at the airport somewhere," Mark said."

"Perhaps," Waverly replied.

"But everything possible is being done. There is nothing else you could contribute. I prefer you here for the time being."

"Yes, sir," Mark said. "I–"

"One moment please," Mr. Waverly said. "We have something on the pen-communicator circuit–"

"Mr. Waverly, sir. This is Randy Kovac!"

Mr. Waverly looked around at the big clock which told the time around the world. He said somewhat severely, "Mr. Kovac, I believe your hours with us are from four to six-in the afternoon, not six o'clock in the morning."

"Yes, sir, but because everything was like it was I thought–" "I guess I can take the blame for that, sir," Mark broke in. "He seemed so eager to do something I told him to ask around in the crowd for anyone who saw April or her abductor."

Waverly ignored Mark's interruption. "And how did you come in possession of a pen-communicator?" he asked, his voice stern.

"I took two like you ordered, sir," the boy said quickly. "One I gave to Mr. Slate, but I couldn't deliver the one to Miss Dancer."

"I see," Waverly said, still displeased at Randy's involvement at this time of the morning. "Why did you call?"

"I found something, sir. You know I used to have an early morning paper route before you took me on as an U.N.C.L.E. trainee. I thought maybe some of the route boys might have seen the car. There isn't much traffic when we start throwing papers in the morning."

"That seems an interesting approach," Waverly said, his interest growing. "What happened?"

"I called the circulation manager. He called each district distributor to report to him when each boy came in. There was one who saw them, Mr. Waverly."

"Where?" the U.N.C.L.E. chief asked.

"It was coming out of the airport. He was driving a sports car with the top down. He had a girl with him who looked like she was asleep. The paperboy noticed them because he loves sports cars."

"Very good, Mr. Kovac," Waverly said. "Can you give us a description of the car?"

Randy rattled off a complete description, including the license plate number.

Waverly's bushy eyebrows raised in surprise. "You have it down rather well," he said.

"Yes sir, I called the police to see if any sports cars had been reported stolen from the airport. I thought he wouldn't dare expose himself by renting another car, since he turned the other one in there to make everyone think he was taking a plane."

"I am surprised that the police gave you the information," Mr. Waverly said.

"Oh, I told them I was a copy boy for the *News* and that the editor asked me to call," Randy said.

"Oh!" Mr. Waverly said somewhat weakly.

"I figured he must be trying to get away. So I called all the private airports. I finally found one over in Jersey where a man left a private, plane last night. He was just taking off. The airport attendant said he had a woman with him."

"I suppose you got the flight plan –say, by representing yourself as the nephew of the director of the Federal Aviation Authority?"

"No, sir, I said–"

"Perhaps it is better if I do not know," Mr. Waverly broke in. "Mr. Kovac, you have been up all night. This will have a distinct effect on your school studies. I wish you to get the proper school necessary for

the foundation to enter the U.N.C.L.E. Academy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I–"

"Never mind that. You are not to go around acting like an U.N.C.L.E. agent any more. You are to work to prepare yourself to be such an agent."

"Yes, sir," the boy said in a voice so low it was scarcely audible.

"However," the grim lines of the U.N.C.L.E. chief's face relaxed. "However, if tonight's performance is any indication of the way you will work as an agent for us later, I have no hesitation in saying that you will make an excellent one. *Excellent*, Mr. Kovac."

"Oh!" the boy cried breathlessly. "Thank you, Mr. Waverly. You mean I'll be like Mr. Slate?"

"No," Waverly said. "There is only one Mr. Slate, as there are only one Napoleon Solo, one Illya Kuryakin, and one April Dancer. It will be sufficient if you are just one Randy Kovac."

"Yes, sir," Randy said. "And—!oh, yes, Mr. Waverly, I spent some money making the phone calls and for taxi fare. Is it all right if I put in an expense account?"

Waverly grimaced. "Perhaps I was hasty," he said. "You might just be another Mark Slate after all.

"Yes, file an account, but use Miss Dancer for a model instead of Mr. Slate. Our budget can only stand one like him."

When he broke the connection with Randy, Waverly turned to Mark. "This man is taking April back to Los Angeles. Presumably he is still trying to find this lost trigger bomb," he said. "We have a quite competent staff in Los Angeles. However, if you feel you have anything to contribute, you can join in the search."

"Yes, sir," Mark said quickly. "I'd very much like to go out."

"What would you do?"

"I think I'd start at the cocktail lounge where Royce planted the bomb in April's purse. It seems quite coincidental that she should have been the one woman of Los Angeles' millions that he picked."

"No, it wasn't," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "Miss Dancer filed a complete report while she was waiting for an answer to the planted ad. She made contact with Royce under her assumed identity. She was not aware that he had defected from THRUSH. She was looking for a lead on that spy case you two were on."

"I see," Mark said. "Then when the THRUSH liquidators closed in he had to get rid of it quickly. April was the nearest."

"He, of course, did not then know of her connection with U.N.C.L.E. When he eluded his pursuers he came back to recover the weapon."

"Well, if April dropped it into the dirt around one of the potted palms in the lounge, it would seem to me–"

“I am just a step ahead of you, Mr. Slate,” Waverly interrupted, “I had one of our Los Angeles agents search for it. He found nothing.”

“Did somebody else find it? If April said she put it there, then she put it there,” Mark said.

“All I know is that something THRUSH scientists think capable of setting the air on nuclear fire is loose somewhere,” Waverly said. “This must not fall into Royce’s hands. In his present mental condition, this man is perfectly capable of carrying out his threat to THRUSH that he will commit suicide and take the whole world with him!”

“Yes, sir,” Mark said. The terrible gravity of the situation left him more subdued than Waverly could remember ever seeing the brash young man before. “Have you any special orders, sir?”

“Just find April Dancer,” Mr. Waverly said. “She is the key to this whole thing. Find her!”

ELEVEN

“I’LL BURN THE WORLD!”

The first conscious thing April Dancer recalled was the voice of Franklyn Royce saying, “Doctor, is it necessary for me to get nasty?”

April turned her head. There was a heavy throb inside her temples. Her body was weak, leaving her with a drained feeling. For a moment everything was indistinct. Then she made out Royce sitting on the edge of a cluttered desk with a phone in his hand.

His not unhandsome face was twisted in an ugly, frustrated grimace. It was rapidly darkening with the rush of angry blood to his head.

Suddenly he broke in on the obvious protest at the other end of the line.

“I don’t care if it kills her or not! She has information I must have,” he cried. “I know these stupid fools from U.N.C.L.E. Waverly brainwashes them to the point it is impossible to get any information from them by normal means.”

He listened for a moment, then he burst out again. “I tell you I don’t care if the treatment is fatal, provided I get the information I need first.”

He paused again and then said, his voice heavy with contempt: “Murder? Is it murder to swat a gnat? That is all she is to me. I am through arguing. You get here at once! At *once*, do you hear–or I shall certainly see that the police get evidence sufficient to cause them to reopen the matter of your wife’s untimely death!”

The receiver squawked and Royce laughed.

“It is my business to know about those who might be useful to me!” he said. “I will expect you at once, doctor. At *once*, do you hear?”

April closed her eyes as Royce jammed the phone and turned around. She did not think it a good idea for him to know that she had heard him write her off.

Royce paid her no attention. He hunched over the desk with a slide rule and a pencil, mumbling to himself as he worked.

April half opened her eyes. Then, seeing him engrossed in his work, she gently tested her bonds. Both her hands and feet seemed encased in police-type handcuffs. The movement caused the ancient couch under her to creak.

Royce jerked his head around. He got up. April struggled to sit up. He stood watching her. He made no move to help nor did he object.

He sat down on the corner of the desk, drumming his knuckles on the top.

"You are a very clever young woman," he said.

"Thank you," April said. "I love compliments."

"You know why I brought you here, of course."

"Yes," she said. Then, suddenly deciding flattery was the best weapon against his egomaniac type, she added, "You were too smart for me."

"I am too smart for everybody!" he snapped, irritated by her omission.

"So it would seem," she agreed.

"Miss Dancer," he said. "You have something that belongs to me. I want it!"

He snapped the words out and settled his thin lips in a straight line. He reminded April of a rebellious little boy. She decided a denial would only trigger one of his maniacal rages.

"Mr. Royce," she said, giving him a steady look that he seemed to find disconcerting, "I also want to be more than just a cog in U.N.C.L.E.'s machine. You are holding this weapon over THRUSH's head. I am holding it over yours."

"You are asking me to believe you would betray your beloved U.N.C.L.E.?" he said with a sneer.

"Did you betray THRUSH?" Blood rushed to Royce's face.

His nostrils flared. For a tense second April thought he intended to attack her with his fists. But at the last second he managed to bring his temper under control. .

April Dancer relaxed. She had hoped he would approach her. Although her arms and ankles were fastened with handcuffs, she could still swing her legs up together, and make use of the switchblade knives hidden in the heels of her shoes.

"No," Royce said in answer to the question which so infuriated him, "I did not betray THRUSH. THRUSH betrayed me!"

"You are a traitor!" April Dancer cried. "A professional traitor. You betrayed your own country. You betrayed its enemies. You betrayed THRUSH. You–"

But her attempt to goad him into coming close enough for her to launch a slashing attack with the switchblades in her heels failed again. This time it sunk on the shoals of Franklyn Royce's extreme egotism.

His cry "THRUSH betrayed me" launched such a flood of resentment and fury that he was physically unable to hear April's taunting. He broke into a wild tirade against those who failed to appreciate him.

"Who developed the nuclear bomb-in-orbit for the U.S.

Government?" he cried. "Who developed a way to neutralize it in space for the Russians? Who laid down the mathematics for the interrogation machine for THRUSH that this fool Rottermund is claiming credit for?"

He paused in his fury and beat himself on the chest with his clinched fists.

"I!" he cried. "It was I. And those insufferable fools had the gall to try and tell me what to do!"

"You're crazy!" April cried, trying to penetrate his fury and turn it on herself.

Again he ignored her. "But in the end it will be I who does the telling! They are afraid of me now. It is not like it was when they were pursuing me to kill me! Now I have the upper hand. They didn't know that I had the trigger bomb model. I couldn't let them capture me with it. That is why I placed the precious object in your purse. Then, when I escaped, I sent word to THRUSH headquarters that I had it. I told them my price.

"And that price–that price is to give me the directorship of THRUSH!"

He paused, a look of self-righteous dignity on his face. His voice trembled with what he must have thought was sincerity.

"I am not doing this for myself, you understand," Royce said. His manner was almost a burlesque of the cartoonist's portrait of a ham politician.

"Not for myself, but for the benefit of humanity!" he cried. "With the resources of THRUSH I will weld the world into a single government. This will outlaw war and bring equal prosperity to every former country.

"I, of course, will be the World President. Not that I aspire to any reward for my efforts to establish a planetary government. But I will be forced to take the job because there is no one else capable."

Royce's eyes flashed. His hands clinched until the knuckles were white. "Then I'll burn the world! I'll turn the earth into a blazing star!"

"I don't believe you can do it," April Dancer said, still trying to goad him into striking at, her as he once started to do. "You are a fraud! And your trigger bomb is as phony as you are!"

To April's surprise Royce laughed at her outburst instead of raging.

"It does not matter what you think," he said contemptuously. "THRUSH knows the bomb will work. That is why I decided to control THRUSH rather than U.N.C.L.E. They know I can send this planet of fools back to the primeval fire it came from! They know I can and will!"

On the desk behind him a phone bell chimed softly. Royce turned and scooped it up.

"Doctor Clermont?" he said. "Good! You are at the hotel? That is the correct location. You hardly expected me to stay in such an exposed location. After all I am being hounded by both THRUSH and U.N.C.L.E. I must be more clever than both of them."

He paused to listen to the speaker at the other end of the line.

"I don't care!" he snapped. "Did you bring the drug? Excellent! Here are your orders: I am in my house. The one THRUSH built for me in Pacific Palisades. But what THRUSH does not know is that in the construction I had a secret private laboratory built under the split level. It is not accessible from the main house. Do not go there, for THRUSH has men in the house. They think I must return to the regular laboratory to get my secrets. I planned too well for them. They are all here!

"Now leave the hotel and go to the cocktail lounge known as the Golden Cock on Sunset. Call me from there. I will give you further instructions. By all means be on the lookout for any person trying to follow you. Do not panic if either THRUSH or U.N.C.L.E. agents are following. I'll take care of them."

He hung up the phone and smiled pleasantly at April.

"You see," he said, "I am too clever for these fools. I happen to know from the private detectives I have employed that this man who was with you in THRUSH Headquarters–this Mark Slate–has a stakeout at the Golden Cock."

April's eyes narrowed. This was the lounge where the Burning Air Affair began. Lacking any kind of lead, Mark would naturally have gone there. Knowing that April had ditched the trigger bomb in the lounge, he would assume that as soon as Royce learned of this, the logical thing would be for him to try to recover it.

She–not knowing that U.N.C.L.E. agents had searched the potted plants without finding the bomb–thought they would recover it. Then it would only be a matter of Slate keeping a watch for Royce. Once Royce was captured, any future threat from him would be eliminated.

Sure now that she would never be able to entice the criminal close enough for her to attack with the shoe knives, she switched to a new plan.

If Royce's information about Mark watching the Golden Cock was true, then the heart of her plan depended upon getting the would-be world-destroyer over there himself. This she hoped to do by telling him where she hid the trigger bomb.

She thought there was no danger in this, for Mr. Waverly knew where she hid it. She was certain someone from U.N.C.L.E. had long since repossessed it.

The problem as she saw it now was to reveal the hiding place without making Royce suspicious that she was leading him into a trap. She knew that it must be done under some kind of pressure.

Unfortunately for April, Royce was seemingly not interested in it any longer. He hunched over the desk, covering page after page with complicated mathematical formulae. Several times she tried to talk to him, but he was so engrossed in his work that he did not act as if he was aware of her presence.

April took heart from this. Although her hands and ankles were secured with the handcuffs, she could maneuver herself slightly. She got up slowly. The play in the linking chain between the leg cuffs permitted her to shuffle forward an inch a step.

The girl hesitated after she got erect, intently watching the working scientist. He still paid her no mind. April measured the distance between them, making a mental calculation of how long it would take her to close the distance.

April's hands were cuffed behind her, but she thought this would be an advantage. If she could get to the edge of the desk, she could lean back, grasp the corner to, pivot on, and swing her long, strong legs up to drive the twin knife blades into Royce's sides. A tap on the shoe heels against the desk leg would expose the knives.

When Royce paid no attention to her, April shuffled forward a few inches and stopped. Then a few inches more. And a few inches more.

When she first got up from the couch she was tense, uncertain as to the probable outcome of her desperate attack on the dangerous criminal. But the closer she came to success, the more her excitement grew. Her face glowed with the sheer enjoyment of danger which Mark Slate had observed so often when they were in tight spots together.

But as she moved closer, April realized that she could not approach the right position without the overhead light casting her shadow across the busy scientist's working papers.

April Dancer hesitated, her mind working rapidly. There was no way she could avoid the shadow betraying her without working her way completely around him and approaching from the other side.

This, she knew, was impossible. There was no way she could bring the heel knives into play without something to support her body. She had to lean her hips and hands against the desk, since both feet had to flash up together.

April inched a little closer. Her shadow cut across the edge of the desk. April paused, again mentally calculating the remaining distance and her chances of success. While many of her actions often struck her U.N.C.L.E. co-workers as bordering on the foolhardy, such was not the case. She carefully evaluated every situation. She took some amazing

chances, but everyone was done only after she assured herself that she had at least a slim chance to win. April's complete self-confidence caused her to see more of a chance than was sometimes there.

This was the case now. There was no way she could prevent her shadow falling across the pages Royce was scribbling on. It would be impossible for him to be so absorbed that he would not notice that. Her only chance then lay in moving as rapidly as possible and hoping that surprise would delay his reaction long enough for her to strike.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. half stooped, gathering strength. Then she jumped, half-twisting in the air. She fell with her back to the desk. Her clutching fingers caught the edge. She gripped hard. Her legs flashed up. The naked knife blades caught the light and glittered.

The warning shadow fell, as she knew it would. Royce jerked his head up and half rose. He caught her movement. He threw his body back.

The chair overturned. The knives protruding from the spike heels of April's pumps ripped into the edge of the seat upholstery.

Royce rolled free and leaped to his feet, unhurt.

April Dancer leaned her back on the desk and flexed her knees with the wicked looking knives pointed toward Royce. The scientist circled to the left. April shifted to keep the knife barrier between them.

She shouted at him derisively, trying to goad his explosive temper into an ill-considered attack. It might have worked for his face was growing redder with the rush of raging blood.

But the phone rang on the desk behind her. The sound broke through Royce's rage, recalling him to the problems he had outside of April Dancer…

Some of the color receded. April knew she had lost, but still she twisted, keeping the knives aimed at him as he tried to circle around to reach the phone.

Royce retreated a few steps and picked up the overturned chair. Holding it in front of him, he advanced. April twisted and tried to shoot her weaponed shoes over the top and into him.

He was too fast. The chair came up. The knives jammed into the upholstery.

Before she could pull back and strike again, Royce shoved hard on the chair. April slipped back off the desk. The chair fell half across her. Royce threw his weight on the chair, pressing down so she could not move. He reached down and jerked off her shoes, threw them across the room.

Then he jumped up to grab the still clamoring phone. April painfully pushed the chair off her. April Dancer was down, but not yet out. She looked across at the knives protruding from her shoe heels.

They were too far away for her to hope to retrieve them. April looked back at Royce on the telephone. The idea of trying to ram him in the stomach with her head also had to be abandoned. His keen, hateful eyes were on her. She didn't have a chance to inch her way close enough for such a rush to be effective.

She still had not given up the idea of fighting back. But for the moment, April abandoned her rapid-fire evaluation of escape methods to listen to Royce's phone conversation.

What she heard sent a stab of fear shooting through her aching body. But it was fear for Mark Slate rather than herself.

TWELVE

DEATH TRAP

There was no doubt about it. Royce was leading Mark Slate directly into a death trap.

April heard the embittered scientist say, “Dr. Clermont? Are you at the Golden Cock? Excellent! Make sure that this man Mark Slate follows you. I know he is there. The receptionist is in my pay. She called me. Get her to point him out to you.”

He listened and then said impatiently: “Do it any way you can? Must I write a formula for every movement you make? If nothing better comes to mind, stop a waiter where he can hear you. Ask if anyone has come inquiring about a woman named April Dancer. That will bait him.”

He listened again and a look of extreme satisfaction crossed his face.

“Yes!” he said eagerly. “Now here is what you do: Come directly here. It is that former movie star’s estate. A high wall surrounds the place. Come to the gate. Don’t try to shake your shadow. The gate is open, but get out and dose it behind you.

“This is just to slow your pursuers for a moment. Park in the lot just inside the gate. Make sure you are not observed. There is an entrance behind a terrace of pyro-canthia climbing the inside of the wall. This will take you inside the wall and down a narrow set of stairs. This leads you here.

“If Slate does not see you enter, he will assume that you went up the curving path to the house. Now here is the gimmick. There is a closed circuit TV monitor installed in a tree just beyond the curve. I had it put there when the house was remodeled. In addition to a laboratory for me, it was intended to be THRUSH’S West Coast headquarters.

“Slate will walk right into a THRUSH trap!”

He put down the phone and smiled satanically at April.

“M-Mister Royce!” April tried to put a shake of fear into her voice. It sounded forced, even to her ears. “I’m ready to make a deal!”

He gave her a contemptuous look. “You are the worst kind of a fool!” he snapped. “You are trying to trick me. I’ve tried to bribe men from U.N.C.L.E. before. It’s impossible. Waverly has all of you too badly brainwashed!”

“Try me and see,” April Dancer replied.

“Dr. Clermont is bringing a truth serum, Miss Dancer. I will obtain everything I need from you without any risk. You see, I am too clever for your little tricks!”

“Are you?” April suddenly shifted to new tactics. Her voice was as contemptuous as his. “Are you, Mr. Royce? Did you know that an U.N.C.L.E. scientist has developed an antidote for sodium pentothal? We have an inoculation against the truth serum and all of us have taken it. If you doubt me–”

“I do not doubt you,” Royce broke in. “I know about it.”

“Then you should know there is no way you can get anything from me unless I want to give it to you! I’m willing to make a deal with you. Not for my life, but for Mark Slate’s. Stop him from walking in on that THRUSH trap upstairs and I’ll tell you where I hid the bomb.”

“And if you told me you hid it in–say, a potted plant in the lounge, I’d exclaim with surprise!” The heavy sarcasm turned to rage. “Do you take me for a fool? Me? I have personally had that place shaken down. Men from U.N.C.L.E. searched it. None of us found a thing. Do you know what that means, Miss Dancer?”

“No,” April replied firmly …

“It means that you are trying to outwit THRUSH, U.N.C.L.E. and me.”

“A girl can’t have everything,” April said quickly. “I’ll settle for outwitting THRUSH and U.N.C.L.E. I am still willing to deal with you.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t need you,” he said. “I have about me the few people I do need. And as for your puny inoculation against sodium pentothal, the serum Dr. Clermont is bringing is not SP. It is a new and more powerful means of chemically inducing truthful answers.

“Your inoculation is worthless. This drug is so powerful you’ll answer every question I ask. Unfortunately, for its general use, it sets up reactions in the body which lead to blood cancer. Those unfortunate enemies it is used on always die. Nothing can save them.”

April stared at the disturbed man. It seemed ironic that this one man could succeed single-handed in doing what a powerful international organization like THRUSH had failed to do: Bring the world to its knees.

And Royce could do it if he regained control of the monstrous trigger bomb. He was so disturbed mentally that he would either rule or destroy everything.

The terrible danger facing herself did not disturb April Dancer.

But the fate waiting for all humanity caused the young girl an apprehension beyond anything she had ever known before in her life.

Mixed with April’s fear was an angry bitterness that the solution to the whole problem was so near; yet so far Royce was the key to the

whole thing. Kill him and the: menace disappeared. Find the' trigger bomb and dismantle it, was the final step. The girl from U.N. C.L.E. was sure that even THRUSH would never dare to build another model of the terrible weapon. It would all end if she could just cover the ten feet between them and destroy the frustrated egomaniac threatening them all.

Royce interrupted her furious thinking with an impatient: "What is keeping that fool Clermont? He should have had the serum to me by now."

"You'll never find what you're looking for," April said. "I told Mr. Waverly where I hid–"

"Waverly doesn't have it!" Royce snapped. "That I know!"

"You don't know anything about–"

"Hush!" he snapped suddenly as a hidden speaker started to crackle. Royce's eyes glowed as he leaned forward to listen. He looked across at April.

"You will see now how I know so much about U.N.C.L.E.," he said. "You forget that I am considered a very brilliant physicist by those who know the field. But even they underestimate me. What you are hearing, Miss Dancer, is the extension of an U.N.C.L.E. pen-communicator antenna. I have determined the secret broadcast wave length and constructed a decoder. It unscrambles the code which this ingenious U.N.C.L.E. broadcaster automatically converts the voice into before transmitting it."

April Dancer paled in spite of her almost iron self control. She knew from Royce's dossier that he was a brilliant man. He had a mind capable of breaking the U.N.C.L.E. code if anybody could. Such an instrument would hit U.N.C.L.E. operatives a hard blow. Of more immediate concern, it might well prove the last nail in Mark Slate's coffin.

The thing she feared most proved true. It was Mark's communicator cast that Royce was tuned in on.

April heard Mark say, "Mr. Waverly? Come in, sir."

"This is Waverly," the U.N.C.L.E. chief's voice said.

Royce looked across and laughed softly at the dismay April could not prevent showing on her face.

"Sir," Mark said. "I followed a man who apparently has an appointment to see Royce. As I understand it, Royce was smuggled back into the U.S. by THRUSH agents and set up in a private laboratory here in the Los Angeles area. This was before he betrayed the organization by stealing the first working model of the trigger bomb."

"You have the location of his laboratory?"

"Yes sir, but the FBI checked the place earlier on a tip that Royce

had reentered the U.S. The laboratory has been taken over by a private group. They seem to be clean. No sign of Royce was found."

"Give me the location, if you are going there," Waverly said. "If there is trouble I can dispatch help at once."

"Yes, sir," Mark said. "I got the lead on this man from hearing him inquire in the Golden Cock about April Dancer."

"Could this have been a trick to gain your interest?"

April clinched her fists and leaned forward, fearful of Mark's answer. Royce's face hardened. He seemed scarcely to breathe as he also waited to hear April's partner's reply.

"I don't think so," Mark said. "I asked the receptionist at the Golden Cock about him."

April's taut breath came out in a deep sigh. She knew from Royce's previous statement that the receptionist was in his pay.

"She told me," Mark went on, "that the man's name is Clermont. He is a nuclear physicist who switched to that field after losing his license to practice medicine. He was formerly associated with Royce."

"And he is headed for this former laboratory Royce used?"

"It is located on a large millionaire-type estate," Mark said. "He entered the gate. I am just getting ready to follow him."

Mark went on to give the exact location.

"Excellent," Mr. Waverly said.

"It is possible Royce has a secret hideout on the estate. If so, we can take definite measures. Continue to follow this Dr. Clermont. If you lose him, or if you think there is a possibility of Royce hiding on the estate, I will arrange with Los Angeles officials and utilities companies to cut all power, water and gas lines into the estate."

"Yes, sir," Mark said. "This is assuredly an underground hideout, if there is one. Loss of power would stop any ventilation system. Royce would be forced in to the open."

"Exactly," Waverly said.

"He has April with him."

"Do all you can to protect Miss Dancer. But this man's threat to the world is so great that–"

"I understand, sir," Mark said.

"And April will too."

"Very well. Carry on, Mr. Slate." I will rely on you."

The communication cut off. "They are going to sacrifice me," April said quickly. "Now you see you can trust me. I'll tell you where I hid the trigger bomb. But I want my price."

He looked at her uncertainly.

His indecision and growing alarm was plainly evident.

"What is this price'?" he asked slowly.

April hesitated, wondering what she could say that would most

impress him.

"When you form your new world government, you will still have to break the earth into states. I want to head the English state. I want to be Queen of England!"

He nodded thoughtfully. This was something he could understand. But he did not immediately answer.

April waited, her tenseness growing, but she managed to maintain an outward calm. Watching him, the girl from U.N.C.L.E. was struck by the complete lack of resemblance between him and the traditional mad scientist concept. He was a handsome man, and except when he triggered one of his rages, normal looking. All the records agreed that he was a brilliant man also. But like Hitler, this brilliance was tainted by two demons that drove him in the wrong direction.

One was his consuming hunger to be at the top. The other was the eroding complex that his genius was not appreciated. This was triggered, she thought, by his inability to take orders from anyone. He bitterly resented anyone telling him what to do. If he could not control then he would destroy.

Finally, Royce's face hardened.

April Dancer knew before he spoke that her bid to trick him had failed again. It did not surprise her. She threw out the suggestion as an act of desperation because there was nothing else she could do right then.

"No," Royce said slowly and thoughtfully. "I cannot trust anyone who has been brainwashed by Waverly. I think you are playing for time. You would send me off on a wild goose chase to give U.N.C.L.E. time to go through with Waverly's threat to drive me out of here."

"But–" April began.

"It is safer my way," he said impatiently. "It is absolutely sure. You will tell me everything I need to know."

She tried to argue, but he refused to listen. He kept pacing up and down the room while he awaited Dr. Clermont's arrival.

Time dragged. April knew it could not be long, since Mark's pen-communicator broadcast to Waverly said Clermont had already entered the estate grounds.

Then suddenly the hidden speaker in Royce's desk crackled again, indicating another pen-communicator broadcast. Royce whirled to listen.

April's heart felt like a giant hand had reached in her chest and was squeezing as she heard Mark say: "You were right about a hidden layout here, sir. Clermont tried to trick me into thinking he was going into the mansion. Instead he took a hidden doorway set in the estate wall. I am about to follow him."

Just the suggestion of a smile crossed Royce's face.

“This pen-communicator decoder is the most important tool I have,” he said. “I built it for THRUSH, but when they betrayed by promoting a man without half my ability, I took it with me when I left. It has been worth a hundred agents to me, for it permits me to sit by the side of Waverly himself!”

He stopped to listen to Waverly’s reply.

“Very good, Mr. Slate,” the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. “I am alerting our other operatives to come to your assistance. Keep in touch with me as much as possible.”

“Yes, sir,” Mark said. “I will report in whenever I can.”

“Good,” Waverly said. “Anytime we do not hear from you within two hours of the last report, we will assume you have failed. Otherwise, we will hold back, waiting for you to do what you can. We cannot afford to alert the enemy by putting in too many men unless we must.”

“That is fine, sir,” Mark said.

“At this stage I can work best alone. I will call for help just as soon as it will do any good.”

“Excellent, Mr. Slate. We will be waiting.”

“And I will be waiting also,” Royce said as the communicator cut off. “We have two hours before U.N.C.L.E. will launch its concentrated attack. That is plenty of time for what I need to do. Once I have that weapon back in my hands no one on earth will dare attack me!”

“Why can’t you just skip out and build another one?” April asked, again playing for time.

She did not know why the idea had not occurred to Royce before, but if he could be persuaded, it would delay his threat to the world by months. That would give time for someone to find and destroy him. At the moment he was being pursued by the FBI on a charge of treason to the U.S., by the Russians for defecting from their employ, by THRUSH, and by the agents from U.N.C.L.E. It would be impossible for Royce to evade such a determined and efficient group of men for long.

An expression of frustrated regret crossed Royce’s face.

“I did not develop the bomb myself,” he said shortly. “It was theorized by a renegade Red Chinese scientist who sold the secret to THRUSH. It was supposed to set up a nuclear reaction in steel. But fortunately just before it was test fired– and maybe it was unfortunate–a computerized review of the basic formulae showed that it would also set the air on fire, consuming all the air in the world.

“They gave me the formulae for review. I immediately realized the possibilities,” Royce went on. “I saw the opportunity to force those fools and the rest of the world with them to give me the appreciation I deserve!”

He opened the desk drawer and took one of the three-way

THRUSH guns. He snapped the catch from bullets to the paralysis pellets.

"Now," he said with satisfaction, "I am ready for this Mark Slate!"

THIRTEEN
FINAL FURY

Mark Slate closed the antenna on his pen communicator and steps leading to Franklyn Royce's underground retreat.

His soft crepe rubber soles made no noise, but he could hear the shuffle of Dr. Clermont's shoes ahead of him. He had his U.N.C.L.E. gun in his hand. Then, uncertain of the immediate future, he extended the antenna of his pen-communicator. He left the transmitting unit in his pocket, however. He only wanted to insure that Waverly was tuned in on what happened if something went wrong as he tried to rush his way into Royce's hiding place.

After a short distance, the narrow corridor widened into a room. Mark suspected that this was an anteroom which opened into the secret laboratory.

To reassure Waverly at the other end of the pen-communicator circuit, Mark Slate slipped one hand into the pocket with the transmitter. Gently he tapped his thumbnail on the speaker cover, spelling out Okay in Morse code.

Mark could now hear Clermont stumbling across the room in total darkness, but he did not try to follow. He expected light to flash out when the inner door was open. He pushed his way along the opposite wall. He kept straining his ears to keep Clermont's position pinpointed. His gun was trained at the spot where he thought the renegade scientist's back would be. When the door opened Mark hoped to get a shot past Clermont and into Royce. Clermont was a minor danger compared to the world wrecker.

He heard the former medical practitioner say, "Royce? Royce! It is I, Clermont. Open up."

Mark stiffened. He knew the man's call had been picked up by the sensitive speaker of the pen-communicator. He tapped a Morse okay on the case again and waited tensely for something to happen.

What came was totally unexpected. Brilliant lights flashed beams from each of the four walls. It was as if he had been dropped into the sun. There was light everywhere, totally blinding. Mark Slate could see nothing and the brilliance sent stabs of pain through his tortured eyeballs.

He heard Clermont squall in fear. "Royce! Royce! "What are you doing! You're blinding me."

"You are no longer necessary to my success," Royce replied in a

calm voice.

Mark fired blindly at the sound of the embittered scientist's voice. He swept the gun in an arc, spraying explosive bullets over a wide area to make up for having to shoot blindly.

He heard Clermont scream above the din in the closed room. He stopped shooting. The blinding light still blotted out all sight for him. He could not determine its sources so he could shoot them out. The light seemed to come from everywhere.

Mark Slate stood there, his head and eyes throbbing from the piercing pain.

He thought he heard a noise and shot at it.

Then Mark thought he heard a sound behind him. He whirled. Abruptly there seemed another noise to the side. He jerked around again. He kept turning until he lost all sense of direction in the room.

Bewildered, he continued to turn. He couldn't see the floor anymore. Mark Slate felt suspended in a ball of light.

But only for a moment. Suddenly the light went out–for him alone. He pitched forward on his face. Franklyn Royce, his eyes protected by extra heavy welder's goggles, stooped over his stunned body and dragged Mark Slate into the laboratory. He took the precaution of clapping handcuffs on the U.N.C.L.E. agent's legs and wrists as he had April.

Mark was not unconscious long, but he had difficulty seeing. Everything in the room was a blur that would not focus. He was conscious of Royce speaking.

"There is nothing you can do!" Mark knew that the words were carrying back to Mr. Waverly in U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. But he also knew that it would be impossible for anyone from U.N.C.L.E. to reach this place soon enough.

"I will!" he heard April cry. She was still trying to buy time by persuading Royce that he had to make a deal with her. "This is your last chance! If you don't, I will kill myself before you can use that truth serum!"

"How?" Royce asked, his voice heavy with contempt. "There is no way you can do anything except sit right where you are! Clermont brought the serum. I'll get it off his body. Then, Miss Dancer, I guarantee you will talk!"

He walked across the room and through a small door. Mark was sprawled on the floor near her feet. She called softly to him. He raised his head.

"I can't see a thing," Mark said feebly, his voice strained.

"We've got to do something fast!" April said hurriedly. "If he gives me that truth serum, I can't keep anything back. It's not sodium pentothal. Our immunity won't protect me."

"Don't worry," Mark replied.

"The thing isn't in any potted plant at the Golden Cock. We searched. THRUSH searched. It isn't there."

"I know," she said hurriedly.

"And I think I know why. That's what frightens me, Mark. When Royce told me he searched there, I wondered why he didn't find it. I thought you got there first. Then when I found out you didn't have it, I wondered where it was. That was my mistake. The truth got in my mind. He'll find out what I thought when he questions me."

"And what is that, April? Speak quickly. I've got my pen-communicator going. Mr. Waverly is listening to us."

"It won't do any good," she said. "Royce knows you have it on and he didn't even bother to shut it off when he knocked you out. He has a pickup decoder. That's how he knew you were following Clermont."

"Really? That's too bad for us, April. But we must talk fast now."

"April, tell us where you think the trigger bomb is hidden," Waverly's voice came seemingly from Mark's pocket. "Perhaps we can beat Royce to it."

"Yes, sir," April said hurriedly. "It is–"

The rest of her words were drowned in a buzz of machine noise. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. jerked her head around and saw Royce standing in the doorway. His hand was still on the switch activating the machinery that drowned her report to Waverly.

Royce, his lips tight, walked across the room and reached down to cut off the transmitter. As he did, Mark lunged.

He struck Royce in the stomach with his head.

The renegade scientist squalled and fell back. Mark tried to follow up his attack, but he couldn't move fast enough with his hands and feet secured as they were. Royce rolled back out of the way.

April Dancer struggled to her feet when Mark launched his desperate attack. But like her co-agent, she couldn't move so fast as Royce.

He scrambled back away from them. He was shaking, unnerved at how closely he had escaped Slate's attack.

"I kept you alive because I thought you might know something if this woman died under the truth serum. But I see that I can't take a chance with you any longer."

He raised the THRUSH gun and pointed it at Slate's chest.

"Don't!" April cried. "If you kill him, I'll kill myself! You'll never learn where the trigger bomb is!"

Royce asked April the same question he previously demanded when she threatened to forestall his questioning by killing herself.

"How will you destroy yourself?" he asked with contempt.

"This way!" April cried defiantly.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. took a deep breath and held it. Her face turned red and. then pale. Royce watched her uneasily. His face was a study in mixed emotions. He doubted that she would voluntarily suffocate herself, but what the scientist knew of the girl's stubborn determination made him wonder.

Royce stood there gun still pointed at Mark's chest, waiting to see if April was bluffing. Mark was as dumfounded as Royce by April's grim determination to sacrifice herself.

"April!" he began in an agonized voice. "Don't do it for me!"

She ignored him. Her face was starting to turn blue for lack of oxygen.

Royce's nerve broke. He was sweating badly. He could see his only chance to bend the world to his feet was crumbling under the stubborn will of the girl from U.N.C.L.E.

"I'm willing to make a deal with you," he said lamely. His body was shaking as badly as his voice.

April Dancer scarcely heard him through the roaring in her ears. Her lungs burned. Her throat felt raw. Stiff jabs of pain ripped through her body as she broke her self-induced suffocation and started to breathe again.

A little color came back to her face. Royce leaned weakly against the desk. He was still shaking. He had the THRUSH gun in one hand and the vial of truth serum in the other.

"You'll never use it on me!" April gasped out. "Are you convinced now that I can and will kill myself first?"

"Yes!" Royce said.

"But I promised to make a deal,"' April went on. Her voice was scarcely intelligible because of the way her chest heaved as her tortured lungs sucked hungrily for long delayed air. "I–I–"

She broke off, unable to continue. His face twitching, Royce started toward her. Then he caught himself and stopped. His eyes narrowed. He glared at her suspiciously, suspecting a ruse to bring him into a position where she might jump him as Mark Slate had.

"I'll agree to whatever you want," he said. "And I'll do whatever is necessary to–"

"I–I feel an attack–" she gasped, her voice going weaker. "I must–I must have-one of the mints–in my purse … "

He picked up April's purse and took out the package of mints. Royce looked at it suspiciously. Watching him through half-closed eyes, April abandoned her idea of asking for a glass of water. It might feed his suspicions and ruin this last desperate chance.

After a slight hesitation, Royce took a single mint from the package. He did not approach her too closely, but tossed it in her lap.

"I can't pick it up," April gasped. "My hands are behind my back.'"

Still Royce refused to come near her. He said, tossing another on the couch beside her, “Pick it up with your mouth. For all I know this might be another of those cute U.N.C.L.E. chemical tricks. It could be a bomb you want to throw in my face!”

April realized then it would be useless to ask for a glass of water. She would never pull off the trick she used on Rottermund in the THRUSH laboratory in New York.

But continuing the subterfuge and keeping the smoke mint handy if a chance did present itself, April bent over. She tossed her head as she bent so that her shoulder-length hair hid her face. She pushed the mint under a wrinkle in the couch, using her chin.

When she straightened up, April said in a stronger voice, “I’m feeling better already. These mints work fast.”

From the floor, Mark said, “I feel like hell too. Give me one.”

“You’ll get one,” Royce said through clinched teeth. “You’ll get a bullet!”

“You’re shaking worse than April,” Mark said quietly. “You had better swallow one of them yourself.”

He ignored Mark’s suggestion, but its tremendous significance caught April’s imagination.

She nodded toward the package of mints still in his hand. “Take one,” she said.

“Look what it did for me,” April went on. “I’m feeling better already. Remember, the men from U.N.C.L.E. are on their way. You’re still trembling. You need something to steady your nerves.”

He hesitated, looking now at her steady hands fastened behind her back with the handcuffs.

“Hurry!” she said. “We’ve got to get out of here. I’m serious when I say I want to go with you. I meant what I said about wanting to be the Queen.”

He half closed his eyes. He reached over and picked up the vial of truth serum.

“There is another secret way out,” he said unsteadily. “I’ll take you with me. If you lead me to the bomb, I’ll make you Queen of England.”

But the way his hand gripped the truth serum gave away his intention of using it on her just as soon as he had allayed her suspicions.

“Then take a mint,” April said urgently. “And give me another.”

He made a visible effort to control his shaking, but was not successful. He had been too unnerved by how closely he came to losing his last lead to the bomb when April tried to suffocate herself.

He tore back the paper on the mint tube. Mark watched in fascination. It was all April could do to control her surging feeling and

to appear unconcerned.

Royce tossed one of the mints in his mouth. All he tasted was the disguising sugar coating. He swallowed.

He took a deep breath as it went down.

"Feel better?" April asked. Royce nodded, apparently aided by suggestion. Then suddenly he half doubled up. A look of shocked surprise twisted his face. He tried to raise the gun and shoot April but he toppled. Smoke, activated by his stomach juices, boiled from his mouth and nose.

"Come on!" April cried to Mark. Together they crawled from the room as the smoke, caught in the narrow confines without adequate ventilation, jammed every corner.

Slowly inching along, they made their way up the tunnel and into the night. As they waited for help to come, Mark asked. April: "Where did that thing go?"

She said, "If you remember, there was a fight between two drunks there in the lounge that afternoon."

"Yes but it was broken up after one knocked the other down."

"I remember that he broke one of the fronds when he fell against the potted plant," April said. "I think all we have to do is find the florist who leases the plants. He probably replaced it and has the injured one at his nursery."

"Why didn't the searchers find that out?" he asked.

"You were one of them. Why didn't you?" April asked. "Because no one wanted to arouse any suspicion. No one went to the management. Each conducted a secret investigation and search. An official police search would have involved going to a judge and getting a search warrant. No one knew the plant was substituted because nobody asked."

And that is the way it was.

When the trigger bomb was recovered, a careful analysis by U.N.C.L.E. scientists verified that it would indeed have turned the earth's air into one giant blaze of nuclear fire.

While April and Mark made a verbal report directly to Waverly, they were still required to make a written report for the record.

As they finished it at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters after a four-hour jet flight back to New York, Mark said to April, "I'm a little sorry Royce didn't give you some of that super truth serum. Then maybe I could have asked you what you really think of me behind that businesslike exterior of yours!"

April Dancer gave him a roguish look and then dropped her eyes demurely. "Well, I did absorb a lot of rays from that truth-forcing interrogation machine of Rottermund's," she said. "Maybe enough residue collected to force me to tell the truth for a while."

“Great!” Mark Slate said with a grin. “What do you think of me–personally, that is?”

April smiled cryptically at him. Then assuming a dreamlike drugged manner, she said, “I think you are the most wonderful person in the world–to have around *when there is a fight*!”

Mark grimaced. “Yeah, but what about between fights?”

April got up. Her hair was now restored to its normal brunette. Sleep on the plane had erased the fatigue in her eyes. They sparkled with her usual joy of life. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. had changed into a tailored suit that displayed her physical charms to devastating perfection.

“Between fights?” April Dancer repeated, smiling at Mark Slate. “Why then I’m so busy looking for another fight that I just don’t have time to think about you at all!”

Mark grimaced again and April said, “Hurry up and finish that thing. And then let’s go look for another fight!”